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The Nation.

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LETTERS

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

AFTER HE'S GONE...

Stockholm

■ Please, oh please, don't let Katha Pollitt take the job on the Supreme Court ["If Not Miers, Who?" Oct. 31]. We desperately need her to be co-President with Molly Ivins after Bush is gone. ULF MOLIN

MIERS FIRES (SELF), RETIRES

Kent, Ohio

■ Re: "One Possible Scenario" [Nov. 7]:

Hats off to Trillin! He inspires
By rhyming ten full times with Miers
(Renowned church-lady who aspires
To chant for George in black-robed choirs).
But now, ensnared in rhyming gyres
That sing like birds and prick like briars,
She'll need a pair of rusty pliers
(Or else a pair of trusty liars).
It's Trillin's wit the left admires—
By God, I hope he never tires!

CHRISTOPHER COTTON

USE THE A-WORD

Lancaster, Ohio

■ I found Dave Zirin's "Pat Tillman, Our Hero" [Oct. 24] quite inspiring. But I must question why Zirin seemed to shy away from using a word that Tillman's brother used to describe this hero. That would be "atheist." As his brother Rich said at Pat's memorial service: "Pat isn't with God. He's f---ing dead. He wasn't religious. So thank you for your thoughts, but he's f---ing dead." GARY P. KERN

TO BE OR NOT TO BE A WORKING MOM?

Long Beach, NY

■ Thanks to Katha Pollitt for debunking the flawed argument Louise Story made in her *New York Times* article about career versus motherhood plans for Yale students ["Subject to Debate," Oct. 17]. But really, who cares what Yale women, or Princeton or Harvard women, are planning after graduation? Given the small percentage of the working population they constitute, theirs is a sample from which we can't generalize to the larger population. How about a study of women at state universities? Or community colleges? In other words, how about a study that tells us something useful? MARY ANNE TRASCIATTI

Mount Airy, NC

■ "Desperate Housewives of the Ivy League?" by the ever-brilliant Katha Pollitt blew me away. I was similarly outraged that "journalism" of this brand still makes the front page of the *Times* in 2005. Pollitt gives me hope that if enough of us skillfully refute such restrictive notions of women's roles, progress will be made. JENNA COLLINS

GOT A HANGNAIL? POP A PILL!

Chapel Hill, NC

■ Ray Moynihan and Alan Cassels's "A Disease for Every Pill" [Oct. 17] does an excellent job of laying out the problem of the medicalization of life by the drug companies. It's difficult for lay people to dispute the word of medical professionals, but it doesn't take an advanced degree to know that you don't need Zellnorm to treat chronic constipation, for example. Eat more vegetables. It's pretty simple. But fixing the overmedicalization dilemma isn't.

Common sense solutions like healthier diets and more exercise are going to make our lives better and our country healthier. They also make economic sense. Drug companies are spending billions inventing disorders and rebranding pills when they should be preparing for avian flu and other threats. Clearly, insurance companies are dishing out lots of cash for all these new prescription drugs, and that has a huge impact on our healthcare premiums. With rising healthcare costs hurting small businesses and even big hitters like the auto industry, it's time to form a coalition of business leaders, conscientious doctors and progressive politicians to take a stand against the overmedicalization of everyday life. JAY CARLIS

Keaau, Hawaii

■ Beware, ye women who use these "miracle drugs"! Along with the potential health risks associated with taking—and getting off—antidepressants comes the risk of compromising one's future eligibility for health insurance. My complaints about mood swings following a hysterectomy years ago prompted my gynecologist to foist upon me samples of one of those ubiquitous SSRI antidepressants, for which close to 200 million prescriptions are filled annually. After taking them for a few years I painfully weaned myself off and celebrated.

Then, after a lapse in healthcare coverage, and with no major medical problems, I applied for a new policy. Our Blue Cross affiliate, which virtually monopolizes the market here, turned me down on the grounds that my "past treatment for depression" was too great a risk for the company to underwrite. Never mind that I was no longer taking the drug, was never treated for depression and the policy didn't even cover prescription drugs! My complaint to the state insurance commission over this blatant discrimination went nowhere. NOREEN PARKS

ABOUT THAT AD...

Montreal; Singapore

■ Melissa Farley's vanity-press paid *Nation* ad ["Unequal," Oct. 10 and 17] does not merit a reply. But we do have to answer her use of our *Nation* article to support her argument. In her first paragraph Farley sets up two false oppositions: considering prostitution to be a form of labor versus considering it violence against women, and representing the struggle as "the Left" versus "we feminists." The quote from us comes next, but our article, "In the Penile Colony: Touring Thailand's Sex Industry" [Nov. 1, 1993], clearly places the violence in the context of sex work in the global economy. Recognizing prostitution as labor neither trivializes nor glamorizes it. In *The Globalized Woman* Christa Wichterich quotes young female sweatshop workers in Bangladesh on their two great fears: fire in the workshop (with no emergency exits) and rape. *We* feminists are committed to fighting both kinds of atrocities.

LILLIAN S. ROBINSON
RYAN BISHOP

HUMAN TRAFFICKING TODAY

Washington, DC

■ There are some errors in Debbie Nathan's reply ["Letters," Oct. 3] and in her "Oversexed" [Aug. 29/Sept. 5]. Our research on slavery in the United States was the first to clearly state that the majority of US trafficking victims are not held in forced prostitution but in other sectors of the economy—the opposite of what Nathan suggests we found. Our estimate is that less than half (46.4 percent) of all slaves in the United States are held in forced prostitution and the rest are forced to work in such sectors as domestic service, agriculture and manufacturing. I suspect she misunderstood our research methods, fully explained in the report (www.freetheslaves.net/tn/Hidden_Slaves.pdf). It seems she misunderstands the International Labor Organization's recent report on forced labor as well, which Nathan references as a contrast to our findings. It actually corroborates them, stating that in transition economies and industrialized countries forced prostitution makes up around half of forced labor. (In fact, *Hidden Slaves* was written in close consultation with the ILO.) Nathan also incorrectly attributes *Hidden Slaves* to Free the Slaves and our president, Kevin Bales, alone. It was conducted jointly with the Human Rights Center of University of California, Berkeley.

Last, Nathan wrongly asserts that Bales "regularly publicizes his belief that sex trafficking prevails over other types, worldwide." I challenge Nathan to find an example of this.

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EDITORIALS

Showdown on the Court

At last, the main event. Judge Samuel Alito, the third Bush Administration nominee to fill Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's seat, forces the debate that both Bush and the Senate have tried so mightily to avoid: whether the Supreme Court should shift decisively and radically to the right. In urgent need of public distraction from the Libby indictment and in obeisance to ultraconservatives in rebellion against the hapless Harriet Miers, Bush abandoned any pretense of bipartisan consultation and reached into the conservative judicial patronage machine's talent pool.

Now social conservatives are cheering, primarily because they perceive Alito to be firmly antiabortion. As an appellate judge dissenting from the reaffirmation of *Roe v. Wade* in *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, he argued that Pennsylvania had the right to require a woman seeking an abortion to notify her husband, a provision that Justice O'Connor and the Supreme Court majority found a noxious burden on women. His *Casey* dissent is most remarkable for endorsing what amounts to a man's property rights over his wife's reproductive choices; Alito dismissed as legally irrelevant evidence that spousal notification laws might lead to an increase in wife beating. That dissent may provide an inkling of where he stands on *Roe* (although Alito privately assured Senator Arlen Specter that he accepts the right of sexual privacy, upon which *Roe* is based), but it is shocking as well for Alito's antediluvian view of women's rights.

Alito's extreme view of the Constitution is evident on a wide array of issues. He was part of an appellate court majority in one ruling severely curtailing citizens' access to courts under the Clean Water Act. In an antitrust case involving makers of transparent tape, he took the side of large corporations against smaller competitors. In several sexual and racial discrimination cases he would have made it much more difficult for victims to sue and get damages. Most ominously, given the Court's current uneasy balance, Alito has consistently stood to the right of O'Connor on key civil rights and civil liberties cases. Many of his majority opinions, as well as positions he took in dissents, were overturned by Supreme Court majorities in which O'Connor cast a decisive vote.

Democrats cannot finesse a confrontation over Alito's consistent right-wing commitments. They cannot claim, as many did with Miers, that he is unqualified or lacks a sufficient record. They should certainly paint a vivid picture of his destabilizing judicial radicalism and hold their caucus to disciplined opposition. But they must also demonstrate concretely the ways a right-wing Court would be devastating to the vast majority of Americans. Alito's confirmation would dangerously enhance corporate power, restrict the legislative powers of Congress and further erode our already diminished civil liberties. His nomination is not only a test for Democrats; it will also be a test of the courage and conviction of prochoice Republican moderates like Arlen Specter and Susan Collins, and of whether the GOP will be in perpetual thrall to antiabortion zealots. The threat of an antichoice Court majority now presents an impossible dilemma for any GOP senator with presidential ambitions: Republicans want to keep evangelical activists inside the tent, but they also know that a threat to abortion rights would alarm the public. Judge Alito's long record sends the Senate headlong into that buzz saw. The question is not whether Alito is an extreme conservative—but whether there is still a Senate constituency for moderation on the Supreme Court.

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COMMENT

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After the Libby Indictment

The indictment special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald unveiled the day his grand jury expired focused on four instances when Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, allegedly lied to FBI agents or grand jurors about his role in the CIA leak affair. Fitzgerald outlined serious charges but did not address the central issues of the scandal, such as which Administration official initially outed Valerie Wilson, *née* Plame, to columnist Bob Novak; how the leaker learned of her CIA position; why that person disseminated this classified information to one or more reporters; what Bush, Cheney and other officials knew about the leak (before and after it occurred); and why Bush and others at the White House at first denied Karl Rove and Libby were "involved," though both were (Rove reportedly confirmed the leak for Novak). The indictment did expose, without elaboration, Cheney's part in an effort to undermine Valerie Wilson's husband, former ambassador Joseph Wilson, who had challenged the Administration's misleading claim that Saddam Hussein had been shopping for weapons-grade uranium in Niger. So now there are more questions than before the indictment. No one, though, has been given the job of filling in all the blanks. And this is a miscarriage of justice.

As Fitzgerald explained at his dramatic press conference, he is a prosecutor, not a public investigator. Under the law he can only release information he has gathered through a grand jury proceeding if it appears in an indictment or is used in a trial. He is not permitted to disclose other details he has unearthed. And he is not obligated—as were independent counsels of the past—to issue a final report. In fact Fitzgerald, citing Justice Department rules, said he did not have the authority to write such a report.

If the Libby case goes to trial, significant information may emerge. After all, the two most tantalizing portions of the indictment involve Cheney. On June 12, 2003—weeks after Joseph Wilson confidentially told a *New York Times* columnist about his trip to Niger and weeks before he revealed this CIA mission in a *Times* op-ed—Cheney informed Libby, as the indictment puts it, "that Wilson's wife worked at the Central Intelligence Agency in the Counterproliferation Division." The indictment says Libby "understood that" Cheney "had learned this" from the CIA. The Counterproliferation Division is a unit in the agency's clandestine service. This passage suggests that Cheney and Libby had reason to believe—or suspect—that Valerie Wilson was an undercover employee. It also reveals that while Libby was gathering information on the Wilsons, the first indication he received that Valerie Wilson might be a covert officer came from Cheney. Why was he rooting out material on Valerie Wilson on his own? Who at the CIA told Cheney about her, and what did he or she say about her position? Did Cheney know that Libby would be talking to reporters about her? The indictment does not address any of this.

In the other intriguing reference to Cheney, the indictment reports that on July 12, 2003—six days after Wilson published his op-ed—Libby and Cheney apparently discussed how to respond to media inquiries about the controversy Wilson had generated, a brouhaha bolstering the charge that Bush, Cheney and other officials misrepresented prewar intelligence on WMDs to

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whip up support for war. What did Cheney tell Libby to do? Did he and Libby talk about using information about Valerie Wilson to undermine Joseph Wilson? The indictment does not say.

The public deserves a full explanation of the leak, which derailed Valerie Wilson's career, endangered her family and possibly harmed national security. Two years ago Bush asked anyone with information on the leak to "speak out." (Rove/Libby/Cheney ignored that command.) Shortly before the Libby indictment White House mouthpiece Scott McClellan said Fitzgerald should "determine the facts and then outline those facts for the American people." But Fitzgerald says that's not his job. For months the White House claimed it could not discuss the leak while Fitzgerald's investigation was under way. Although it is still open (and will likely stay so through any Libby trial), now is a fine time for Bush & Co. to start answering questions. Bush and Cheney could hold press conferences and candidly reply to queries about the scandal. Bush could commission an independent-minded lawyer or investigator to conduct an inquiry that would make public its findings. (The model is the Tower Commission report on Iran/*contra*, which was incomplete but revealed key parts of the story.) But—let's be real—there will be no rush at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to do any of the above, just as the Republican-controlled Congress has also put partisan loyalty above duty and refused to examine the scandal. Similarly, the GOP-run Senate Intelligence Committee put off completing its promised Phase II report evaluating the Administration's prewar assertions about WMDs. But after Democrats, deploying a little-used Senate rule, suddenly forced the Senate into a closed meeting for nearly three hours—no visitors, no reporters, no TV cameras—to protest the delay of the report, Republicans agreed to establish a bipartisan panel to review the status of the Phase II inquiry by mid-November.

Fitzgerald's investigation has not been the appropriate vehicle for discovering *and* disseminating the truth. Much more is needed. Democrats can call for Rove's dismissal. He did violate government rules on handling classified information and Bush's self-proclaimed ethics standards by sharing Valerie Wilson's CIA employment status with at least two reporters (Novak and *Time*'s Matt Cooper). But Bush has stuck with Rove through thick and slime. Besides, firing him would be easier for Bush than disclosing the entire truth about the leak and the war.

The leak scandal has revealed the Bush crew's dishonesty and hypocrisy. Solving the remaining mysteries would likely confirm this. That's why Bush can be expected to break his word and do nothing to bring the truth, which Fitzgerald has under lock and key, into the open.

DAVID CORN

Intolerable Cruelty

LIBERTIES

Do we really need to be "cruel, inhuman or degrading" to win the war on terror? Apparently the Bush Administration thinks so. When John McCain proposed an amendment to a military appropriations bill that would comprehensively ban such tactics, the Administration threatened to veto it. Now that ninety senators, including forty-six Republicans, have voted for it, and Colin Powell and the Catholic bishops have all endorsed it, the Administration has shifted to a stealth strategy. It asks only for an exemption for the CIA, or deletion of the provision that the ban applies abroad. But those proposals would effectively gut the amendment, as its principal legal effect is precisely to bind the CIA in its actions overseas. And as Dana Priest's chilling November 2 *Washington Post* account of secret CIA detention and interrogation centers, known as "black sites," makes clear, this is no abstract debate.

In 1994 the United States ratified the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which prohibits such treatment under all circumstances, specifically including "a state of war." But after 9/11 the Administration argued that the ban does not apply to foreign nationals being held and interrogated abroad. It reasoned that when Congress ratified the treaty, it provided that these terms should be interpreted to prohibit conduct that would violate the Constitution—that is, conduct that "shocks the conscience." Since the Administration contends that the Constitution does not extend to foreign nationals outside our borders, it maintains that neither does the ban on cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

This interpretation runs against the central purpose of the Torture Convention, which is to protect all human beings, regardless of location and nationality. And it transforms what Congress plainly intended as a substantive definition of prohibited treatment into a territorial exception that affords government officials carte blanche to engage in conduct that includes, according to reported US practices, sexual humiliation, use of dogs to terrorize prisoners, sleep deprivation, extended exposure to extreme temperatures, forced nudity, waterboarding and mock burials.

The military is already barred from such conduct by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which prohibits cruelty and

RISE OF AN OPPOSITION?

As remarkable as the concept may sound after years of Democratic dysfunction, something akin to a two-party system appeared to take shape November 1, the week after Scooter Libby was indicted. Democrats forced the GOP-controlled Senate into closed session to discuss the status of a promised investigation into the Administration's misuse of intelligence before the Iraq invasion. Minority leader Harry Reid thundered from the floor, "I demand on behalf of the American people that we understand why these investigations aren't being conducted." Majority leader Bill Frist absurdly accused Reid of "hijacking" the Senate. Frist's fury was understandable—he and his leadership team are unfamiliar with the challenges posed by an aggressive opposition. Taking the Republicans by surprise proved to be smart strategy. The Democrats won the day, securing establishment of a bipartisan committee to examine charges that Intelligence Committee chair Pat Roberts has stalled the investigation. This success should embolden them to question the war and hold the Administration to account. Reid was slow to evolve from "minority leader" to "opposition leader," but success might encourage him to retain the title.

JOHN NICHOLS

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COMMENT

maltreatment. The CIA is not governed by the military's rules, however, so the amendment's principal contribution is to impose such limits on nonmilitary interrogators acting abroad. To exempt the CIA, or to limit the statute to domestic interrogations, would not only rob the amendment of virtually all its bite. It would actually make existing law worse by providing Congressional authorization for cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in certain circumstances. Right now the authority for such action is a highly dubious executive interpretation; the proposed exemptions would give this questionable interpretation legislative approval.

The CIA does not need this exemption. As Priest reveals, the CIA began operating secret detention centers for illegal interrogations only after 9/11. For 200 years our government has gathered invaluable intelligence without resorting to tactics that treat human beings worse than dogs. And as the Army Field Manual on Intelligence Interrogation expressly states, "Use of force is a poor technique, as it yields unreliable results."

Even if inhuman treatment might induce a suspect to talk in a specific case, such methods are difficult to control and in the long run ill-advised, as the migration of such abuses from Guantánamo to wider use in Iraq demonstrates. These tactics ultimately undermine our security, as they impair our legitimacy and create ideal recruiting tools for the enemy. It is simply immoral to claim that we can inflict on other countries' nationals cruel and inhuman treatment that would not be tolerated if it were imposed on our own citizens.

If we are to prevail in the war on terror, we must do so by distinguishing ourselves from our enemy. Terrorism is a moral evil because to achieve its ends it brutally disregards the value of human life. Torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment are evil for the same reason. As John McCain said, this is not about who they are, "this is about who we are." DAVID COLE

David Cole is The Nation*'s legal affairs correspondent.*

CALVIN TRILLIN

SCOOTER LIBBY: A REPUBLICAN NURSERY RHYME

Scooter Libby told a fib. He
Shouldn't have told at all.
Though not slimy all the time, he
Has to take the fall.

Permaslimer all-the-timer
Rove has got away.
Naught to plea to, he's now free to
Slime another day.

Assad on the Brink

Syria's Baathist regime is among the most opaque on earth, and an abiding uncertainty is just how much the young and inexperienced president, Bashar al-Assad, has ever really controlled the despotic apparatus he inherited from his father, Hafez. So there is inherent plausibility in the story current among diplomats in Damascus: When Bashar picked up the phone on February 14 and was told that former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri had been blown up, he went ashen with shock. It was witnessed by the Western visitor he was receiving at the time.

Of course, there had always been the strongest suspicions that Syria masterminded this most fateful political assassination, and the report of UN prosecutor Detlev Mehlis has now all but confirmed them. In doing so, he has also added critical weight to the longstanding expectation that this most damaging of self-inflicted injuries would eventually confront the regime with an existential crisis—one that, thanks to the legacy of its long misrule, could easily degenerate into a national crisis, even civil war.

Among the suspects Mehlis names are those two pillars of Assad family rule, Bashar's brother Maher and his brother-in-law Asef Shawkat. Mehlis also strongly implies Bashar's own complicity, with the account of a meeting with Hariri during which Bashar reportedly threatened to "break Lebanon on your head." Yet the diplomat's tale suggests that though Bashar must have been aware of the ways his father's old guard dealt with defiers of Baathist power (Lebanese politicians conspicuous among them) and of the likelihood that the old guard would apply those methods to the troublesome Hariri, he was genuinely aghast when they actually did. And the tale coincides with what a lot of Syrians still desperately want to believe: that Bashar is fundamentally different from that old guard and its new guard successors; that he is a reformist at heart; and that reforms emanating from the apex of the system would be the best and perhaps the only way of achieving an orderly transition from despotism to democracy.

Only five days before Mehlis released his report, but partly in response to hopes for change that his inquiry had already aroused, the still weak but growing opposition promulgated a platform for reform and invited "people of the regime" to join it. They pledged to "work together to put an end to despotism...and do whatever is necessary to launch a process of democratic change in the country." The well-known writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a former seventeen-year inmate of Baathist jails, hailed this "Damascus Declaration" as "historic." He did so not only because of its aims but because for the first time since the Baathists seized power in 1963, such a comprehensive range of signatories—including secularists, Islamists, Kurds and prominent personalities—were joining forces. It offers an alternative, he said, to the only choices the regime is offering: its own perpetuation on the one hand, or chaos or Islamist extremism on the other.

If Bashar has the will and a strategy to save himself and his regime, his relationship to the Hariri murder (was it indeed complicity or a *fait accompli* thrust upon him?) must profoundly influence which of the two courses open to him—cooperating with Mehlis or defying him—he finally and irrevocably chooses.

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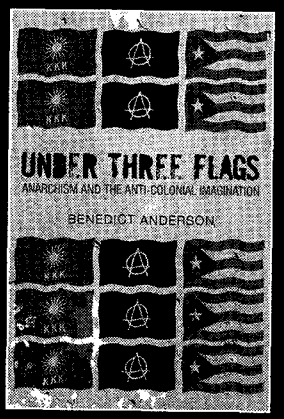

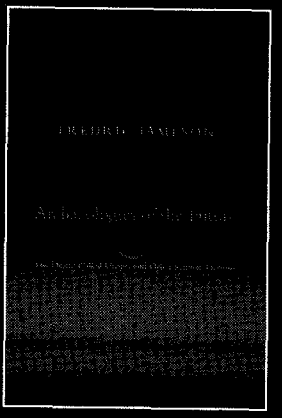

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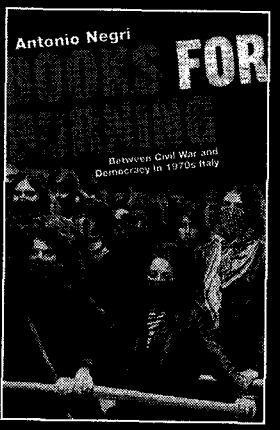

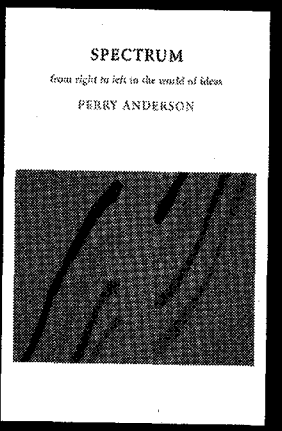

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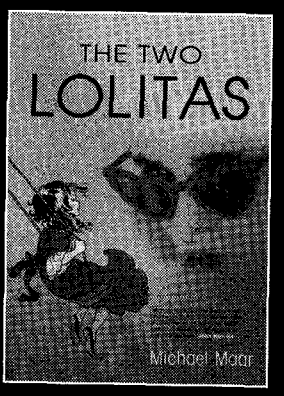

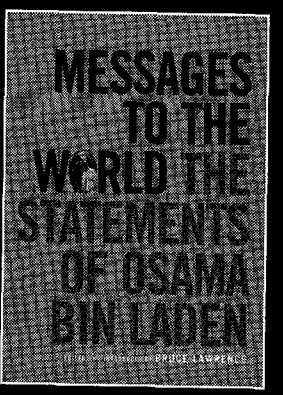

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For he cannot just go on vacillating between the two. Not surprisingly, with Mehlis's interim verdict Bashar has veered strongly toward defiance, clearly the easier, instinctive course, in the short term at least. The "masses" took to the streets in officially inspired demonstrations against the report. Parliament declared it to be "politicized" in America's and Israel's interests. The newspaper *Al-Thawra* called it another stage in the neoconservative grand design for the Middle East. But this is a road inexorably leading to international pariahdom, to sanctions in which Europe might join the United States, to a consequent aggravation of already deteriorating economic and social conditions at home. The domestic isolation of an unloved regime will only be intensified by the fact that the Syrian people, many of whom didn't, or didn't want to, believe it capable of such a crime—so stupid a one at that—are coming around to concluding that the regime, as much as Americans and Zionists, is the source of their woes.

Yet even now Bashar continues, all but schizophrenically, to offer cooperation—if only he gets the "concrete evidence" he is waiting for. Cooperating means, of course, what the unanimous UN Security Council resolution now says it means: "unconditionally," and requiring the detention and hand-over for interrogation of, among others, his own kith and kin. Such score-settling, in a system of rival power fiefdoms often aptly likened to mafia gangs, would be as normal as it would be infinitely hazardous—witness the recent "suicide" of Ghazi Kenaan, interior minister and Syria's former proconsul in Lebanon. If in fact the Hariri killing was not Bashar's doing, one can well imagine that his personal as well as political impulse to hazard a decisive confrontation with the old guard must be very strong. Certainly he will never come into his own till he brings the fiefdoms to heel. And if he does, he will win back the popularity, and more, among the opposition and people at large, that he has now forfeited through his continuous subservience to the old guard and its hated system.

There is actually a third choice, much mooted these days, that might help him take the plunge—though this one isn't his alone to make. Under a grand Qaddafi-style bargain with America, he would yield up those regional assets—such as his support for Hezbollah and Palestinian militias and any control he might have over the jihadi pipeline on the porous Iraqi border—that always furnished the means to impede or assist American purposes in exchange for survival and continued mastery in his own house.

Bashar barely hides what, in his weakness, has become his strongest suit—the prospect of his collapse and the "second Iraq" it might engender. That should be almost as alarming to America as it is to the Syrians—no small irony for a US Administration that, in overthrowing Saddam Hussein, not only expected to replace him with a compliant new order in Baghdad but, with the fall of other dominos (particularly the Baathists next door), to achieve the same result throughout the region. Bashar could hardly expect George W. Bush to abort the international due process the Mehlis inquiry embodies, yet surely he can hope for some pragmatic dilution of it. After all, if in his era of "freedom and democracy" Bush was cynical enough to strike such a bargain with a minor player like Qaddafi, mightn't he do the same with Assad, for much greater reward—the more so in that Bush is almost as embattled as the Syrian leader himself? DAVID HIRST

David Hirst, a longtime Middle East correspondent for the Guardian, *is the author of* The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East *(Nation Books).*

In Fact . . .

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

■ Given the hateful rhetoric on both sides of the Israel-Palestine question—most recently the speech by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calling for Israel to be wiped off the map—Dr. Nur Masalha provides a reasoned perspective. A Palestinian historian, author of *Expulsion of the Palestinians* and other books on the Middle East, he teaches at St. Mary's College, University of Surrey, Britain. Regarding Ahmadinejad's comments, he writes: "They are both empty rhetoric and highly damaging to the Palestinian cause. They are empty rhetoric because they are part of a long tradition in which Arab and Muslim leaders make bombastic statements on Palestine without the slightest intention of putting them into effect. They are damaging to Palestinians because they distract attention from the catastrophic situation under Israeli occupation and from the campaign of assassination the Israeli army is conducting in the West Bank and Gaza, which has killed more than two dozen Palestinians since the summer pullout from Gaza. But Ahmadinejad's rhetoric also raises a key issue at the heart of the Israel-Palestine conflict: the need for Palestinian Muslims and Christians to make a clear distinction between our political struggle against institutionalized racism and ethnic cleansing in Palestine-Israel and the fact that we and the Israelis will, ultimately, have to live together as equal citizens under some form of secular democracy—rather than wipe each other out. Muslim fundamentalists (Ahmadinejad included) have miserably failed to understand the reality in historic Palestine. In the process of brutal colonization of the country, a Hebrew-speaking "nation" has emerged, with its own distinct language, culture and flourishing literature. There are 5 million to 6 million Hebrew-speaking Israelis, and no one has the right to talk about wiping them out. Acknowledging the current binational reality is completely different from legitimizing the colonial process by which this reality has come about. The fact that the Israelis are trying quietly, but systematically (although not always successfully), on the ground to do to Palestinians in the West Bank what Ahmadinejad seems to suggest should be done to Israel should only encourage us to seek an alternative, humanist vision, away from political Zionism and Islamic fundamentalism."

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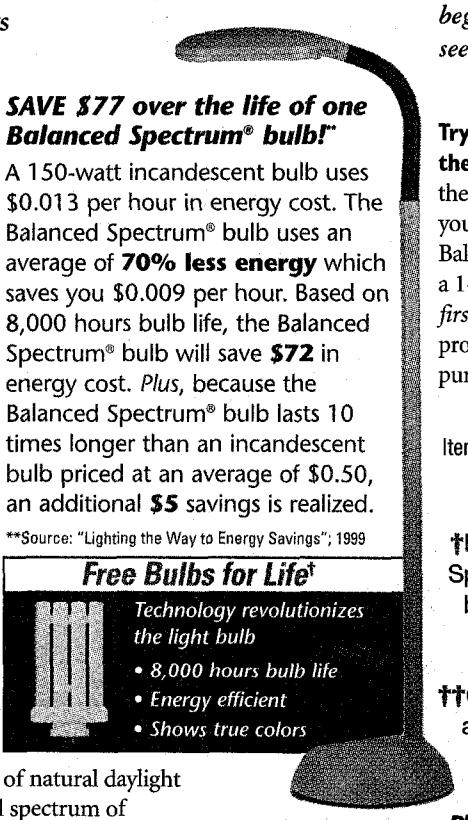

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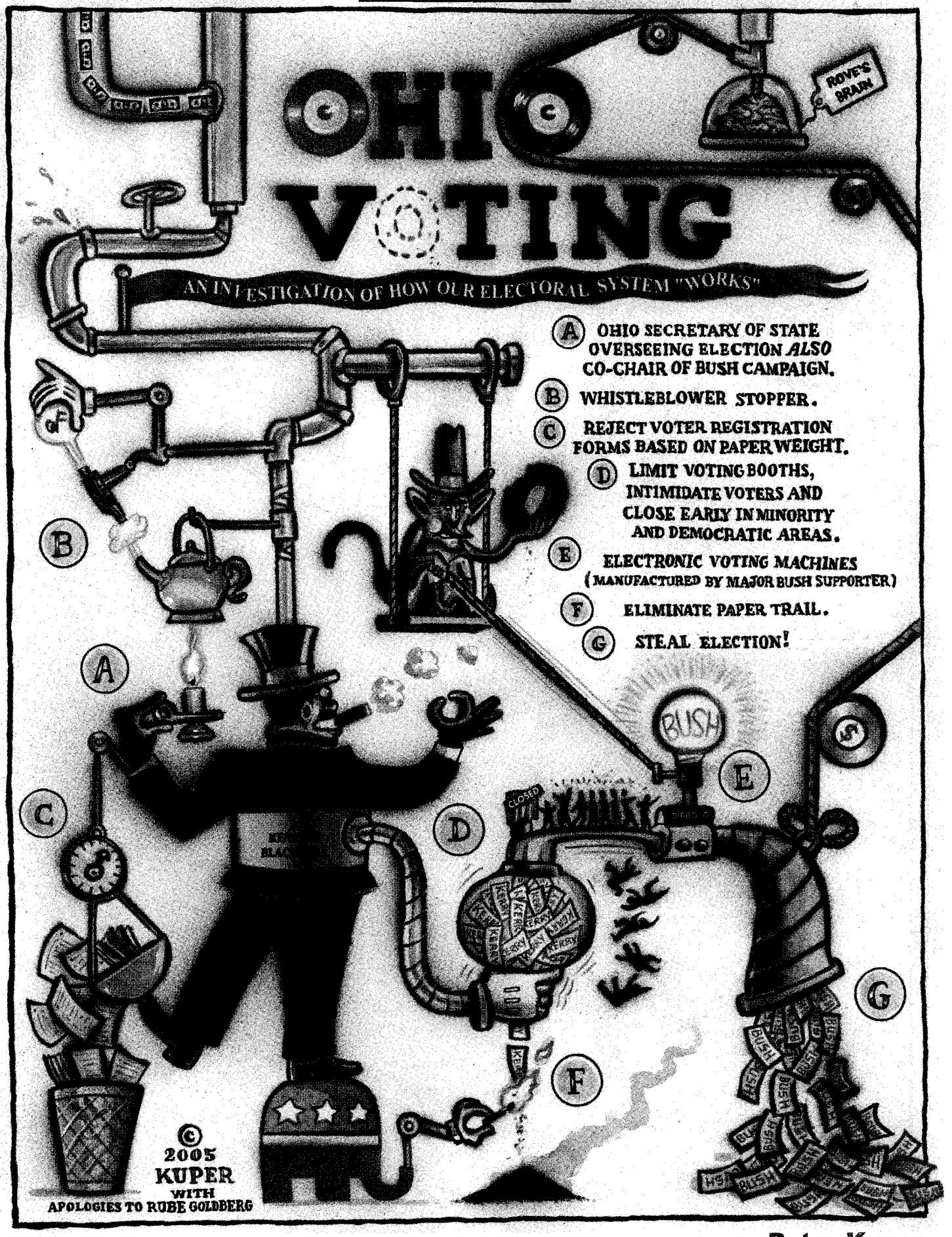
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Peter Kuper

Peter Kuper is co-editor of the political zine World War 3 Illustrated *and illustrates "Spy vs. Spy" for* Mad *every month. More of his work can be seen at www.peterkuper.com.*

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JONATHAN SCHELL

Faith and Fraud

A factitious picture of the world built up by the Bush Administration over its five years in power is now going to pieces before our eyes. Great jagged spikes of reality, like the crags of the iceberg that ripped open the staterooms of the Titanic, are tearing into it on all sides. The disrespected world of facts, an exacting master, is putting down this governmental insurrection against its ineluctable laws.

The pivot is of course the war in Iraq, which in its origins and conduct was and remains a colossal, blood-drenched fraud. But now a majority of the public has caught on and wants the United States to withdraw. In addition, a special counsel has reached directly into the White House and, for the first time since 1875, indicted an official who works there: the Vice President's chief of staff, Lewis Libby, who was trying to suppress the truth about the war by punishing a truth-teller, Ambassador Joseph Wilson.

But of course, the Administration's rebellion against the factual world has gone far beyond the war. The government has been mobilized across the board to erase or deride knowledge of everything from the largest problems now requiring the world's attention—such as global warming and the spread of weapons of mass destruction and their materials (while the Administration ransacked Iraq in vain for them)—to the comparative minutiae of domestic policy, such as the cost of prescription drugs, the extent of power-plant pollution and malfeasance in the award of Pentagon contracts.

As the fantasy explodes, new aspects of the machinery of falsehood are being brought into view. The willful, concerted, energetic tenacity of the defense of fiction is notable. The twenty-two pages of Libby's indictment portray the office of Vice President Cheney skillfully and relentlessly deploying all its resources to protect the single false allegation that Iraq was purchasing uranium in Niger before the war. Cheney and his team worked for weeks to marshal the information and misinformation with which to smear Wilson. Meetings were held to discuss just how to spread the dirt to reporters. A misleading identification ("former Hill staffer") for the designated smearer, Libby, was concocted.

Did the Administration know the truth and lie to others, so that "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy," as the head of British intelligence put it contemporaneously? Or was it that Bush officials "misled themselves.... And then they misled the world," as the United Nations inspector at the time, Hans Blix, has recently said—in keeping with the old principle of salesmanship that the most persuasive deceiver is a self-deceiver? Or did the Administration, like an overzealous policeman who believes someone is guilty and plants evidence on him to "prove" it, just believe that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction and, combining faith and fraud, fix the facts to fit its belief? Whichever it was, the effort was arduous and protracted. And the same can be said of other assaults on factual truth and its tellers. For hiding the real world, with its powerful capacity to pour forth oceans of new facts every day, is not an inconsiderable task.

Perhaps that's why, in a more recent discovery about the Bush officials, they turn out to have had a minimal interest in actually running things. Many have noted that the Administration had no plan for running Iraq. But it took the federal response, or lack of one, to Hurricane Katrina to show that the same might be true of the Administration's approach to the United States. In light of this new surmise, other puzzles melt away: a Clear Skies Act that dirties the skies, a Social Security plan to address a financial shortfall that deepened the problem and so forth. It has turned out that the Republican Party, which has long seen *government* as "the problem," not "the solution," is uninterested in *governing*. But if a "government" ceases to govern, can we call it a government? If a "supermarket" sells no food, can we call it a supermarket? We all keep referring to the "Bush Administration," yet administering seems to be the last thing on its mind.

These disclosures bring a new question to the fore: If the Bush outfit is not governing, what *is* it doing? The answer comes readily: It wishes to acquire, increase and consolidate the power of the Republican Party. At home the GOP is to become a "permanent majority for the future of this country," in the words of former Republican majority leader Tom DeLay, now also indicted, and abroad the country would be the imperial ruler of the globe.

But if the manufacture of illusion is a shortcut to power, it is a poor long-term strategy in a democracy—as long as the system still functions. The dream of the one-power world may have expired in intractable Iraq, but the dream of the one-party state at home is not yet dead. Bush's difficulty is that his chief opposition is not the weak-kneed Democrats, unable to mount effective opposition even to the Iraq War, but the neglected stuff of the real world. What is currently "voting" against Bush, you might say, is not so much the bloc of independents or security moms or any of the other slices of the demographic pie that public opinion pollsters examine but the molecules of carbon dioxide heating up the global air, the collapsed water purification system of Iraq, the dollars fleeing our Treasury, the wages emptying out of people's pockets.

The weekend following Libby's indictment, a surprising consensus emerged among outside political observers in both parties: Bush should admit error and hire new counselors who could "talk reality" to him, in the words of Ken Duberstein, a chief of staff to Ronald Reagan. The White House quickly brushed the advice aside. Through a spokesman, Bush declined the opportunity to admit anything. And then, bright and early Monday morning, he nominated right-wing Judge Samuel Alito for the Supreme Court, in a trumpet call to rally his right-wing political army. As John Yoo, a right-wing former Bush Administration Justice Department official put it, "With this nomination, Bush is saying 'Bring it on!'" No one would talk reality to Bush. He would fight the truth-tellers, and the truth they would tell him, to the end.

Jonathan Schell is The Nation Institute's Harold Willens Peace Fellow.

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PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS

Genes, Genius, Genies

DIARY OF A MAD LAW PROFESSOR

In the beginning, there was a time when doctors treated pregnant women by listening to them tell of their symptoms. There were no visuals, no color glossies, no T-shirts with the sonogram emblazoned. There was relative quiet in the womb, which took quiet to attend to. It required listening to the woman say, "This is what it feels like." It required a palpating of the body, a laying on of hands. Midwives and doctors used touch, eyes, ears, measuring from the outside to get a sense of what was within—sounds, motions, clues. It was the mother-to-be whose health was indicative of the condition of the embryo or fetus. Whether life was deemed to begin at conception or whether with quickening, the interdependence of the womb and the woman was a given. I'm certainly not advocating that we turn back the clock with regard to obstetric medicine, but it is arresting to recall that interconnectedness in a time when "life" has become increasingly divorced from traditional contours of the human body. We live in a time when embryos and fetuses are gaining legal rights to sue, are attaining the status of persons, are being enshrined in a molecularly sized iconography of innocents to be saved. With technology, we can make visual what no generation has been privy to before. Like satellites homing in on a secret bunker from space, we have the spyware to case the joint—the interior of the uterus, the cells, even mitochondria, and now DNA.

With all that comes interpretation, and politics, and ideology. And lo, the birth of "the unborn." The magnified fetus becomes an external, a separate entity. Women are no longer imbued with the halo-illuminated metaphors of ripeness and enfolding that underscore so many of our religious notions about women round with child. At least or perhaps especially in the United States, we find ourselves tangled in new definitions of separation and individuation. There has been a restructuring, of our rhetoric as well as of certain religious ideologies, that expressly pits a woman's body against her fetus. There is, these days, a tendency to conceive of the fetus as an entire person, and a litigious little person at that, with a warrior attitude and a long list of complaints that can be asserted against the madonna in question. We've all read about negligence actions, criminal cases, child welfare cases, all involving fetuses still *in utero*. But the status of the fetus is no longer the most contentious part of the debate. It's moved further and further back in the developmental cycle. Recently the Arizona court of appeals declined to rule that a set of cryogenically frozen fertilized eggs were "persons" for purposes of a wrongful death action, saying that such a designation was for the legislature. The lawsuit was brought by a couple who had sued the Mayo Clinic after its lab lost or possibly destroyed some of the eggs. The eggs were days old, still a clump of cells; nevertheless the court was careful to craft a special category for them: "pre-embryos." Pre-embryonic status is thus not a biological designation but rather a new legal category, a way of dodging the political controversy engendered by those who believe embryos are calling out for rescue. As John Jacubczyk, president of Arizona Right to Life, stated the argument: "Life begins at fertilization."

Although the Arizona court did not confer personhood in this case, the matter is sure to be appealed; furthermore, an Illinois court ruled this past February that an embryo is a person, a claim that is likely to make its way to higher authorities—whether courts or legislatures—sometime in the not so distant future. So we should consider carefully the collective narratives that are shaping the debates. At one end we have the Snowflakes Frozen Embryo Adoption Program, a Christian organization that has made it its mission to rescue the unused embryos that have been harvested by fertility clinics and then discarded by couples once they do achieve a successful pregnancy. Snowflakes considers the abandonment and/or destruction of those cells nothing less than murder, and so has set out to "adopt" discarded embryos. It has rounded up women in whom to implant them, and families with whom to place the babies thus brought to term. Mere blastemas are imbued with intent and longing; indeed, the Snowflakes website asserts that it is "helping some of the more than 400,000 frozen embryos reach their ultimate purpose—life."

On the other side of things there is a philosophically inflected concern that if cellular "life" is equated with personhood, and personhood begins at fertilization, then the very notion of the person as an autonomous entity becomes terribly vexed. Eggs fertilized in a petri dish and stored in a freezer are more consistent with our notions of property, of product, of artifice. From this angle, eggs in a dish are relatively artificial, a species of mechanical construct requiring tools, inventory, technology. At the same time, there is also a commercial narrative of altruism, in which those fertilized eggs are, not unlike the Snowflakes website's take, so purposeful, so hyper-autonomous, that they can fight their way out of a petri dish with no help from a womb or a woman or even a mad scientist. Personhood becomes an anthropomorphizing of cellular life—the tiny but strong, the minuscule but mighty, the intelligence with design, the responsible agent, the genie in the jar that imprisons the fully formed perfect child yearning to break free. It is a very seductive story, even if it is questionable as a scientific matter. And more to the point for us in the legal community, it confuses will and determinism, potential and predestination.

But if the power of these narratives has resulted in a kind of cult celebrity status for the pre-born, or prenatal, or pre-conscious or whatever, imagine how much more creative it will get with the emerging overlays of DNA screening, of accumulating commercial interests in profiles for health insurance, in DNA banks as a tool of social engineering. Somewhere between the extremities of the moment, we must remember that there is nothing inevitable in this course; let us not be seduced by an idealized personification of destiny. Let us not forget that one in five American children lives in poverty. And at least 130,000 post-born, not-so-perfect children ("surplus" is how Seventh Circuit Judge Richard Posner once expressed it) are available for domestic adoption at any given time. Aren't they "a person" too? ■

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ERIC ALTERMAN

Can We Talk?

The conservatives may look to be imploding at the moment, but liberals have a serious long-term problem that won't go away. Despite an almost perfectly evenly divided electorate, virtually the entire government and most of the opinion media are controlled by extremist right-wing reactionaries. Their advantages, moreover, can only grow as a stacked system of representation favoring rural areas and red-state strongholds, coupled with a traditional but increasing advantage in fundraising, offer the ruling right wing further opportunities to cement their gains and pursue new ones.

To New Democrat academics (and former Clinton Administration officials) Elaine Kamarck and William Galston, authors of the study *The Politics of Polarization*, the answer is for Democrats to jettison their liberal base and embrace a series of conservative and centrist policy proposals. To *New Republic* editor Peter Beinart, it is to expunge everyone and everything associated with the 3 million–member MoveOn.org, which coincidentally happens to be the most effective organizing and fundraising tool liberals have come up with in the past two decades. Both solutions are not merely misguided but counterproductive. (Beinart's, moreover, is altogether impossible. Just how would liberals expunge MoveOn members? Loyalty oaths? Lie detector tests? What candidate is going to refuse their support? And is this really a moment when so-called "liberal hawks" ought to be lecturing those of us who were right about George Bush's catastrophic war?)

Kamarck and Galston's argument, on the other hand, seems to rest heavily on a simple misunderstanding. Just because voters refused to call themselves "liberal" doesn't mean they reject liberal policy solutions. As I pointed out in my last column, in fact the opposite is true. Kamarck and Galston counsel surrender on exactly the ground where liberals are strongest: public policy arguments where modern—admittedly chastened—liberals share a broad agreement with the majority of Americans on matters of health policy, taxation, environmental protection, regulation, freedom of choice and even most foreign policy issues. No less significant, American voters often care more about whether a given candidate truly believes what he or she says than about whatever this or that policy detail might be. Caving in to conservatives across the board would appear to confirm Robert Frost's devastating quip: A "liberal" is someone so broadminded he won't take his own side in an argument.

Moreover, as any Democratic candidate can tell you, you may not want to call yourself a "liberal," but that's what you will be called, both by Republicans and a compliant media. It's no coincidence that polls show more than twice as many voters considered John Kerry to be a "liberal" than described themselves that way.

What's needed is not for liberals to eschew passion—or worse, to turn their guns on their own troops—but to fight back smartly and strategically. There is no simple way to do this, given the structural impediments, but surely the beginning of wisdom is accepting and naming the problem. Liberals need to find a means to bridge the gap between Americans' belief in liberal solutions and their willingness to trust liberals to enact them. It will be a multifaceted task, but its foundation lies in finding a language that speaks both to Americans' values and their self-interest while inspiring people to move beyond the toxicity of our O'Reilly/Limbaugh/Scarborough–style political "discourse." At the same time, it must be a language that transcends the identity politics and competing victimizations of the past few decades, which have weakened liberalism from within and tarnished its good name among the white working class.

In many ways this task is the same one faced by the antiwar movement. A significant majority of the public believes the war was a grave error, dishonestly undertaken. But this is not the same thing as trusting its opponents to take over. To earn that trust, war opponents have to articulate both a critique and a vision that resonates with a broad majority of patriotic Americans and with liberals' own values and beliefs. When movement leaders share a stage with a bunch of Stalinist androids from International ANSWER and the like who support not peace but Saddamite dictatorships, without disassociating themselves, then liberals are truly strengthening their enemies and sowing the seeds of their own impotence.

On the other hand, purity of purpose can lead just as easily to a paucity of results. It can be self-defeating to demand 100 percent fealty to our goals and objectives, regardless of calculations of pragmatism or even efficacy. In response to attacks on Democratic senators supporting John Roberts's Supreme Court nomination, Senator Barack Obama—who opposed it—nevertheless engaged the readers of the popular weblog Daily Kos with an eloquent admonition that the "tone of much of our rhetoric is an impediment to creating a workable progressive majority in this country." If liberals are to approach this goal and take advantage of Americans' rejection of the far right's reactionary agenda, they must first find a way to establish a basis for common understanding through respectful discourse. On that score Obama bravely explained to the sometimes overheated liberal blogosphere, "When we lash out at those who share our fundamental values because they have not met the criteria of every single item on our progressive 'checklist,' then we are essentially preventing them from thinking in new ways about problems. We are tying them up in a straitjacket and forcing them into a conversation only with the converted. Beyond that, by applying such tests, we are hamstringing our ability to build a majority."

As it happens, Senator Obama—the walking, talking embodiment of Dr. King's dream and an early and eloquent opponent of Bush's war—is also pointing the way toward finding language that offers liberals a chance to engage Americans on the terrain of their hopes and dreams rather than their fears and insecurities. Space does not permit a detailed explication here, but read his much circulated June 4 Knox College commencement address (www.knox.edu/x9803.xml) and see if you agree. ■

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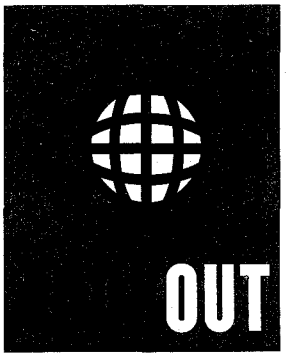
NAOMI KLEIN

The Threat of Hope in Latin America

When Manuel Rozental got home one night last month, friends told him two strange men had been asking questions about him. In this close-knit indigenous community in southwestern Colombia ringed by soldiers, right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas, strangers asking questions about you is never a good thing.



The Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca, which leads a political movement that is autonomous from all those armed forces, held an emergency meeting. They decided that Rozental, their communications coordinator, who had been instrumental in campaigns for agrarian reform and against a Free Trade Agreement with the United States, had to get out of the country—fast.

They were certain that those strangers had been sent to kill Rozental—the only question was, by whom? The US-backed national government, which notoriously uses right-wing paramilitaries to do its dirty work? Or was it the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Latin America's oldest Marxist guerrilla army, which does its dirty work all on its own? Oddly, both were distinct possibilities. Despite being on opposing sides of a forty-one-year civil war, the Uribe government and the FARC wholeheartedly agree that life would be infinitely simpler without Cauca's increasingly powerful indigenous movement.

Prominent indigenous leaders in northern Cauca have been kidnapped or assassinated by the FARC, which seeks to be the exclusive voice of Colombia's poor. And indigenous authorities had been informed that the FARC wanted Rozental dead. For months rumors had been circulated that he was the worst thing you can be in the books of a left-wing guerrilla movement: a CIA agent. But that doesn't mean the strangers were FARC assassins, because there had been other rumors too, spread through the media by government officials. They held that Rozental was the worst thing you can be in the books of a right-wing, Bush-bankrolled politician: "an international terrorist."

On October 27 the Indigenous Council, representing the roughly 110,000 Nasa Indians in the region, issued an angry communiqué: "Manuel is no terrorist. He is no paramilitary. He is no agent of the CIA. He is a part of our community who must not be silenced by bullets." The Nasa leaders say they know why Rozental, now living in exile in Canada, has come under threat. It is the same reason that this past April two peaceful indigenous villages in Northern Cauca were turned into war zones after the FARC attacked police posts in the town centers, giving the government an excuse for a full-scale occupation.

All of this is happening because the indigenous movement is on a roll. In the past year the Nasa of northern Cauca have held the largest antigovernment protests in recent Colombian history and organized local referendums against free trade that had a turnout of 70 percent, higher than any official election (with a near unanimous "no" result). And in September thousands took over two large haciendas, forcing the government to make good on a long-promised land settlement. All these actions unfolded under the protection of the Nasa's unique Indigenous Guard, who patrol their territory armed only with sticks.

In a country ruled by M-16s, AK-47s, pipe bombs and Black Hawk helicopters, this combination of militancy and nonviolence is unheard of. And that is the quiet miracle the Nasa have accomplished: They revived the hope killed when paramilitaries systematically slaughtered left-wing politicians, including dozens of elected officials and two Unión Patriótica presidential candidates. At the end of that bloody campaign in the early nineties, the FARC understandably concluded that engaging in open politics was a suicide mission. The key to the Nasa's success, Rozental says, is that they are not trying to take over state institutions, which "have lost all legitimacy." They are instead "building a new legitimacy based on an indigenous and popular mandate that has grown out of participatory congresses, assemblies and elections. Our process and our alternative institutions have put the official democracy to shame. That's why the government is so angry."

The Nasa have shattered the illusion, cherished by both sides, that Colombia's conflict can be reduced to a binary war. Their free-trade referendums have been imitated by nonindigenous unions, students, farmers and local politicians nationwide; their land takeovers have inspired other indigenous and peasant groups to do the same. A year ago 60,000 marched demanding peace and autonomy; last month those same demands were echoed by simultaneous marches in thirty-two of Colombia's thirty-three provinces. Each action, explains Hector Mondragon, well-known Colombian economist and activist, "has had a multiplier effect."

Across Latin America a similarly explosive multiplier effect is under way, with indigenous movements redrawing the continent's political map, demanding not just "rights" but a reinvention of the state along deeply democratic lines. In Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous groups have shown they have the power to topple governments. In Argentina, when mass protests ousted five presidents in 2001 and '02, the words of Mexico's Zapatistas were shouted on the streets of Buenos Aires. At this writing, George W. Bush is on his way to Argentina, where he will discover that the spirit of that revolt is alive and well.

As in northern Cauca, governments attempt to brand these indigenous-inspired movements as terrorist. And not surprisingly Washington is offering military and ideological assistance: There has been a marked increase in US troop activity near the Bolivian border in Paraguay, and a recent study by the National Intelligence Council warned that indigenous movements, although peaceful now, could "consider more drastic means" in the future.

Indigenous movements are indeed a threat to the exhausted free-trade policies Bush is currently hawking, with ever fewer buyers, across Latin America. Their power comes not from terror but from a new terror-resistant strain of hope, one so sturdy it can take root in the midst of Colombia's seemingly hopeless civil war. And if it can grow there, it can take root anywhere. ■

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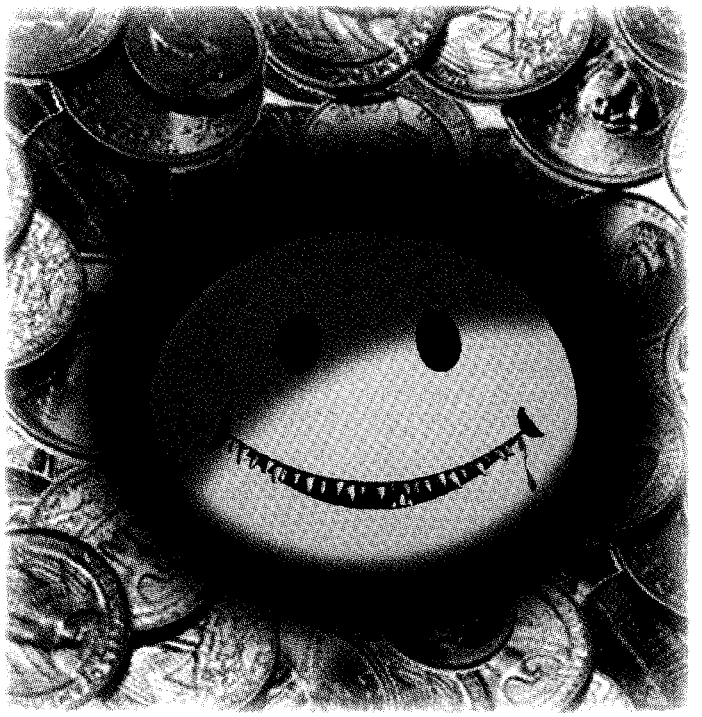
ARTICLES

MANNA FROM HELL

Wal-Mart's charitable dollars promote a right-wing, antigovernment agenda

by LIZA FEATHERSTONE

With a combined fortune of more than $90 billion, the Waltons—the immediate heirs of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton—are the richest family in the world. Five of the country's ten richest individuals are members of Sam's immediate family: his wife, Helen, and their three surviving children—Rob, Jim and Alice—as well as his late son John's widow, Christy (John Walton died in June when his private plane crashed). Until recently, however, they gave away little of their fortune. As Sam Walton explained in his 1992 autobiography, *Made in America*, he didn't believe in giving "any undeserving stranger a free ride." Nor did he believe in being generous with company profits. "We feel very strongly," he wrote, "that Wal-Mart really is *not*, and *should not* be, in the charity business." Money that Wal-Mart donated to charity, he reasoned, would only come out of the pockets of "either our shareholders or our customers." (He didn't mention workers, perhaps a tacit acknowledgment that picking their pockets was just business as usual.) As for politics, Sam couldn't stand the stuff. At a 1988 Mother's Day "toast and roast" honoring Helen Walton, then-Senator Dale Bumpers of Arkansas quipped that waiting for big campaign contributions from the Waltons was like "leaving landing lights on for Amelia Earhart."



All that has changed. Since Sam died in 1992, both the Bentonville, Arkansas–based company and the family have dramatically escalated their charitable giving, becoming far more influential in the worlds of philanthropy and politics. It is hardly a coincidence that this transformation occurred after Wal-Mart became the nation's largest private employer and a flytrap for much-deserved criticism. The company is battling numerous employee rights lawsuits in court, the biggest of these being *Betty Dukes v. Wal-Mart Stores*, a sex-discrimination class action representing 1.6 million women. Communities around the nation, charging that the company is a stingy low-wage employer with an arrogant disregard for local and national laws, are battling to keep Wal-Mart from opening or expanding stores. Several labor unions have made fighting Wal-Mart a top priority. This year two major national organizations, Wal-Mart Watch and Wake Up Wal-Mart, formed to lead a citizens' movement to pressure the company to change its ways.

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP), a watchdog group, released a report in September, *The Waltons and Wal-Mart: Self-Interested Philanthropy*, detailing the recent increase in Wal-Mart and Walton philanthropy and noting its likely relationship to the company's image problems. Indeed, the increase has been staggering. The Walton Family Foundation (WFF) gave away $106.9 million in 2003—the most recent year for which data are available—twice as much as in 2000. Wal-Mart's company PAC, now the third-largest corporate PAC and the second-largest corporate donor to the GOP, gave away $2.1 million in 2004, compared with just $100,000 in 1994. The Walton family, too, has greatly increased its political giving; in 2004, for example, Alice donated $2.6 million to the influential Republican PAC Progress for America, which supported the sleazy Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and gave Bush a critical push in the election's final months. Since 1999 the Wal-Mart Foundation (WMF)—a company-controlled entity with no direct connection to the WFF—has tripled its giving and by the end of this year will have doled out more than $200 million in cash and merchandise, according to spokeswoman Melissa O'Brien.

The company also donated $20 million in cash and merchandise to the Hurricane Katrina relief effort, garnering extensive—and partially justified—praise. To antigovernment zealots like *New York Times* columnist John Tierney and the wing nuts running the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, Wal-Mart's impressive response to the hurricane showed that the private sector is simply more effective than the government. It is true that when you starve government by draining its resources and electing officials who don't believe in it, nothing seems

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to work. But Wal-Mart played a major role in that eviscerating process. Much of Wal-Mart's philanthropy (as well as that of the Walton family) has been directed toward promoting anti-government politics, whether by lobbying against high taxes for the rich or contributing to Republican candidates, conservative think tanks and efforts to privatize education.

Jeff Krehely, who co-wrote the NCRP report, says that for his organization, such a sharp increase in giving, coupled with the company's obvious desire to spin itself as a better corporate citizen, "raises red flags. We wonder, What's the agenda here? What's happening?" The WMF's Melissa O'Brien told *The Nation* that criticisms of the company come from "special-interest groups" and do not influence its giving. She also told the *New York Sun* that the NCRP report was funded by Target, a charge Krehely calls "ludicrous." (Dayton Hudson, Target's former parent company, contributed to the NCRP in the 1990s. In 2000 the company reorganized as the Target Corporation and hasn't contributed to the watchdog group since.)

Wal-Mart has promoted antigovernment politics with its philanthropy, whether by lobbying against taxes or giving to conservative causes.

Each Walton heir has philanthropic projects of his or her own—Alice, for example, is building a world-class art museum in northwest Arkansas—but the family fortune should be considered as one because most of the money is managed together. The giving is also largely administered together, through the Walton Family Foundation, as well as through close communication among its family members. (At least twice a year, the family meets to talk about how to spend its money.) The Waltons own about 40 percent of Wal-Mart's stock, making Wal-Mart essentially a family business—highly unusual for a large multinational company. (Both the Wal-Mart Family Foundation and Walton Enterprises—the company that represents the Walton family's interests—declined to cooperate with this article, or to make any of the notoriously press-shy Waltons available for interviews.)

Philanthropy obscures the often unseemly process by which the money was made—and for Wal-Mart that's at least part of the point. Stephen Copley, a United Methodist Church pastor who serves on the board of the Arkansas Single Parents Scholarship Fund, a Springdale, Arkansas, charity that has benefited from Walton dollars, says that the program has "an incredible success rate. One lady even got a PhD. [The Walton money] does a tremendous amount of good." However, he adds, "it's great to help single parents go to school, but those same single parents might be working for Wal-Mart, and they can't afford health insurance." Copley, also head of the Arkansas Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, is troubled that in his home state, Walton and Wal-Mart generosity "gets great media...they look so good even though in reality their business practices are very bad."

The Wal-Mart Foundation gives a staggering number of gifts, apparently in order to buy goodwill in as many communities as possible, rather than, as Krehely points out, "giving to sustain organizations." The WMF's 2003 IRS 990 form is 2,239 pages long, far longer than that of the Ford Foundation, which has billions more in assets. That's because most WMF gifts are tiny: thousands or even hundreds of dollars to churches and Lions clubs and Boys and Girls clubs, $500 to the YMCA of Nashville and Middle Tennessee and to the Tulip Trace (Indiana) Girl Scouts Council and so on. Communities where Wal-Mart faced a particular battle over opening a new store—Inglewood, California, or New York City—enjoyed especially generous largesse. Like the flowers and other tokens of courtship from a suitor who later becomes a wife-beater, such gifts are often followed by demands for public subsidies and tax breaks. In this way Wal-Mart is repeating the strategy that has served it so well in Arkansas, where Wal-Mart and the Waltons' charitable gifts are many and company critics are relatively few. Says Lindsay Brown, president of the Central Arkansas Labor Council, "It's a hell of a plan, and it works."

We are supposed to applaud philanthropy—the very word connotes altruism and "giving back"—but Walton and Wal-Mart giving serves as a reminder that philanthropy provides an alternative to taxation, a way for rich people and corporations to decide what to do with their extra money, as opposed to letting the rest of us decide through our elected governments. Since charitable donations are a tax write-off, as Krehely points out, "they are supposed to benefit the public good." He thinks it is reasonable to ask whether a family's—or a company's—philanthropy serves the common good, or at least enough good "to make up for the public revenue that we're losing."

Funny he should mention taxes: Wal-Mart and the Waltons have, after all, been notably reluctant to pay them. Not only has the company lobbied for tax breaks in communities all over the nation, the Waltons—the family that former Wal-Mart board member Hillary Clinton has called "the best America has to offer"—have campaigned vigorously against the estate tax. They have donated money to its opponents, Republicans like John Thune of South Dakota and David Vitter of South Carolina, and enlisted one of Washington's top lobbying firms, Patton Boggs—a leading anti–estate tax lobbyist—to represent their interests.

Chuck Collins of Responsible Wealth, a group of well-off people who strongly favor the estate tax, observes that the Waltons sometimes say the estate tax is not a priority for the family. "That may be true from their perspective," he says, "but it's a bit like an elephant saying it's really not interested in stepping on anthills. When you're America's wealthiest family, you are a philanthropic and lobbying heavyweight even on your minor interests." For instance, Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, one of a handful of Democrats who draw checks

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Liza Featherstone is the author of Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Workers' Rights at Wal-Mart. *Research support for this article was provided by the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute. Thanks to Laura Starecheski, who contributed reporting, and to Meleiza Figueroa, a researcher on Robert Greenwald's film* Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price, *who, with the generous consent of her employers, shared her findings. For information about screenings, see www.walmartmovie.com.*

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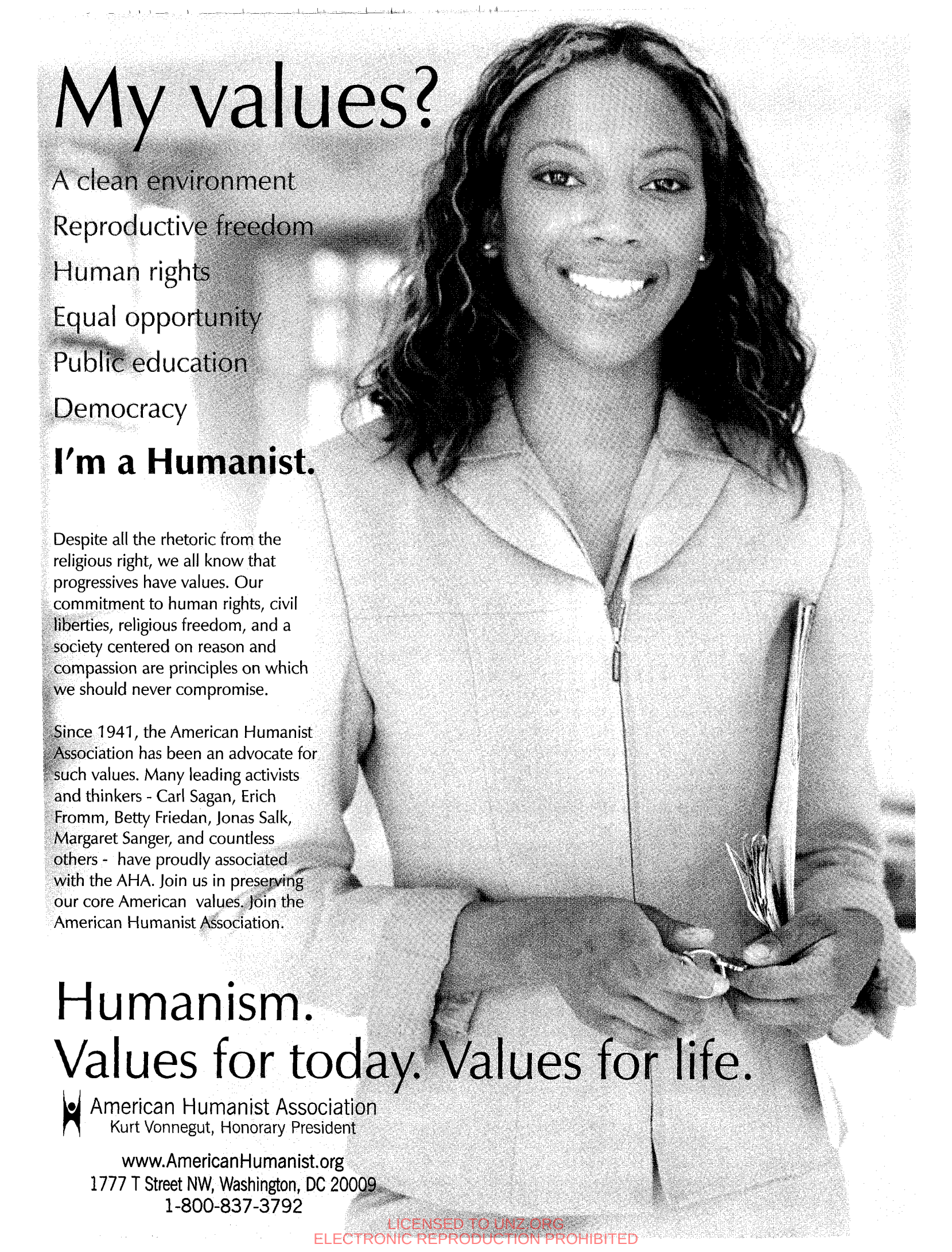

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from the Waltons, supports estate-tax repeal (or crippling "reform"). "Senator Lincoln will wax eloquent about the small farmers of Arkansas," Collins says, "but what's really on her mind is Walton."

In addition to campaigning specifically against the estate tax, the Waltons also give money to groups that generally favor tax giveaways to the rich, like Americans for Tax Reform. And the Waltons have already reaped the benefits of tax policies enacted by the conservatives they helped put in office: This year Bush's dividend tax cut will save the family $51 million, according to Lee Farris, an estate-tax expert with the Boston-based United for a Fair Economy.

The Waltons' philanthropy—and their hostility to paying their fair share of taxes—also needs to be viewed in the context of tax subsidies Wal-Mart has received for building new stores, which Good Jobs First places at more than $1 billion, an estimate that does not include the many other ways taxpayers subsidize Wal-Mart stores, for instance, through numerous forms of public assistance—Medicaid, Food Stamps, public housing—that often allow workers to subsist on Wal-Mart's low wages. A report by the House Education and Workforce Committee conservatively places the latter at $420,750 per store; the Wal-Mart Foundation's per-store charitable giving is just 11 percent of that amount ($47,222).

In addition to spending on Republican candidates, the Waltons have lavished funds on right-wing ideological institutions.

In addition to spending on Republican candidates, the Waltons have lavished funds on right-wing ideological institutions—organizations that serve the interest of wealthy individuals and lawless antiunion companies like Wal-Mart. From 1998 through 2003 the WFF contributed $25,000 to the Heritage Foundation, $15,000 to the Cato Institute, $125,000 to the Hudson Institute, $155,000 to the Goldwater Institute, $70,000 to the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, $300,000 to the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, $185,000 to the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy and $350,000 to the Evergreen Freedom Foundation.

Both the family and the company have made education a major funding priority. Many of the WFF's education gifts have a distinct ideological tilt, emphasizing a "free market" approach to education reform, a vision the late John Walton embraced with particular enthusiasm. The WFF funds advocacy groups promoting conservative school "reform"—otherwise known as privatization—like the Center for Education Reform and the Black Alliance for Educational Options, as well as the actual programs these groups champion: charter schools and voucher programs. (The BAEO did not return calls for this article.)

Among such projects, the Waltons tend to fund the most mind-numbing and cultish, giving in 2003 alone nearly $3 million to Knowledge Is Power (KIPP) schools and millions more to other schools using the KIPP curriculum, which emphasizes regimented recitation rather than critical or creative thinking. Particularly widespread in low-income neighborhoods, such schools seem bent on disciplining and exhorting the poor rather than developing human potential (much like Wal-Mart as a workplace, with its relentless company cheers and dead-end jobs). Several years ago the principal of New York City's John A. Reisenbach Charter School, which uses the KIPP curriculum and received $118,000 from the Waltons in 2003, told me proudly, as we watched fidgety second graders chant meaningless slogans, "We are getting them ready for business."

The WFF has become the single largest source of funding for the voucher and charter school movement. Walton funding allows some charter schools to spend more per pupil than "competing" public schools. The ironic result is that while these projects are supposed to demonstrate to the public the wonders of a marketized approach to education, the WFF's money gives its grantees an advantage over other schools, allowing them to perform better than they would otherwise. "[The Waltons] claim to support competition and the free market," says Paul Dunphy, a policy analyst for Citizens for Public Schools, a Boston-based coalition, "but actually they are manipulating the market, conferring advantage on their pet projects."

It's a fitting paradox, since the Wal-Mart economic model, like almost anything held up as an example of the beauty of the free market, contains so many contradictions (yes, it's extremely profitable, but look at all those tax subsidies). Because so much Walton and Wal-Mart philanthropy is crudely self-interested, it's tempting to find an equally crude motive for the Walton family's interest in education; many Wal-Mart critics have assumed that the Waltons must be planning to reap several more fortunes through for-profit education companies. That's not completely baseless: John Walton was briefly involved in such a venture. However, he backed out, realizing such profiteering was hurting the credibility of his education reform efforts. And so far, for-profit education is still not a very profitable industry—especially when compared with retail.

The Waltons' motives for supporting the privatization of education seem—at this writing, anyway—to be ideological, even idealistic, rather than an elaborate backdrop to a new money-making scheme. Like many rich Americans who have helped to finance the far right's rise to power, they have embraced a worldview in which what's good for the wealthy is good for everyone else. And greater cultural acceptance of the unfettered market—through an increasing tolerance for privatization of all kinds—will certainly make the world safer for a family business that thrives on weak government and lack of regulation. But it's also likely that the Waltons, like most right-wingers, sincerely believe that their ideas have the potential to improve people's lives. Why wouldn't the Waltons genuinely believe in the free market? Look how well it has served them.

Helen Walton, now 85 and in poor health, is expected to donate almost all of her personal fortune—worth $18 billion—to the WFF upon her death, which, as the NCRP points out, will make that entity the richest foundation in the world. This should disturb progressives, since so much Walton money goes to support conservative causes. Yet although the current direction and political leanings of Walton "philanthropy" are clear, the future is a mystery. As Krehely observes, nothing is known about the politics or interests of Sam Walton's grandchildren.

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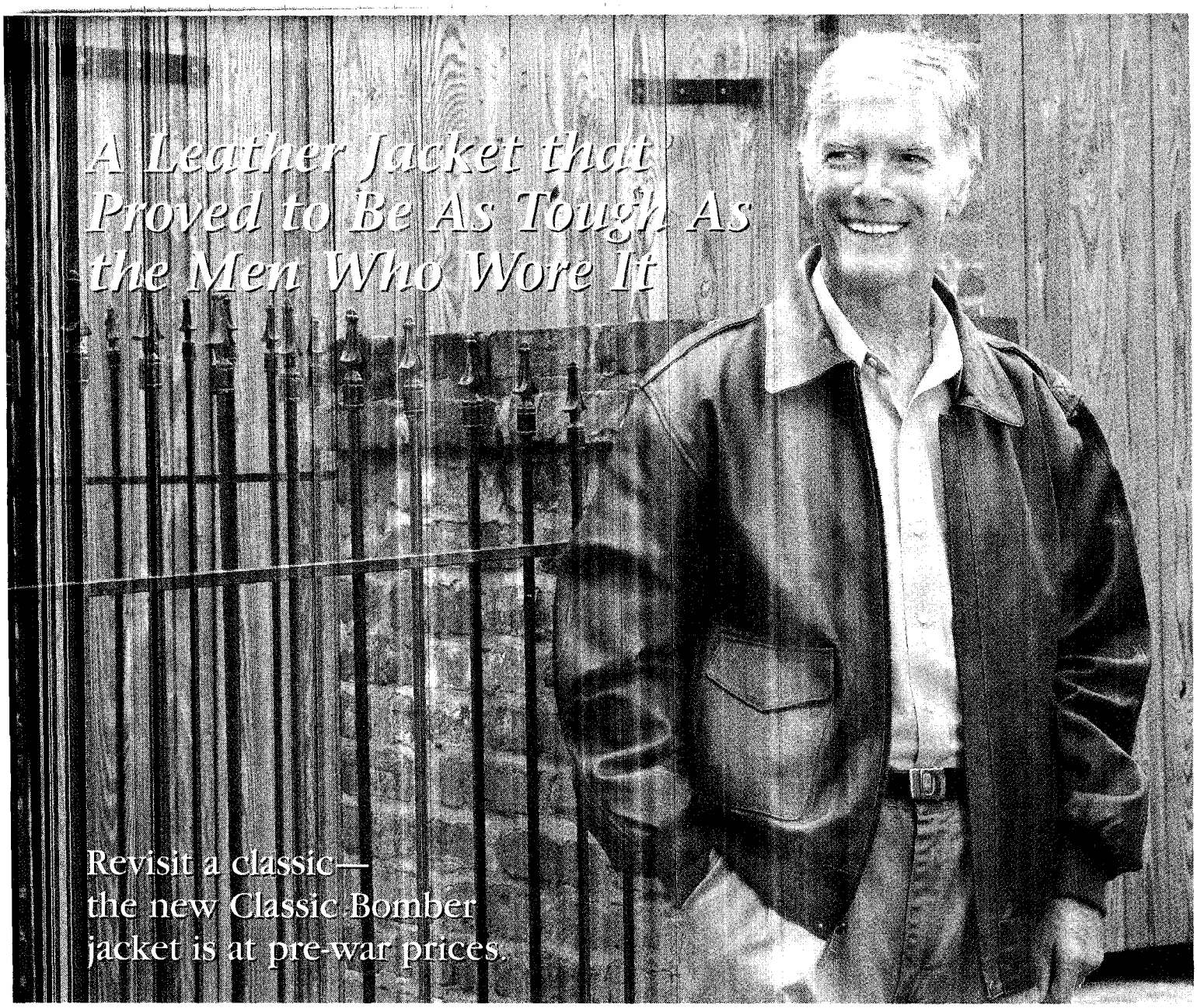
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This matters in a family foundation; this fall the Olin Foundation closed its doors, having spent down its endowment because the older generation did not trust the younger Olins to carry on the family's right-wing traditions. Since the Waltons don't say much about their future plans, or about their internal family politics, it's unclear what lies in store for this—currently—right-wing fortune.

"The Waltons could be an enormous force for good," says Responsible Wealth's Chuck Collins. "As the company's biggest shareholders, they could decide that Wal-Mart could pay a living wage. They could use their charitable dollars not to undermine public education but to boost educational opportunity. They could become major contributors to social good. But they're not."

One item in the Walton Family Foundation's most recent IRS filing shows how uninterested this family is in true social responsibility: a measly $6,000 to something called the Wal-Mart Associates in Need Fund. Contrast that with the millions the family spends promoting right-wing causes, and it becomes painfully clear that the Waltons value conservative ideology far more than they value the human beings who have made them the richest family on earth. Told about these figures, Kathleen MacDonald, a Wal-Mart candy department clerk in Aiken, South Carolina, responded bluntly, "All I have to say about that is, it doesn't surprise me. Like Bush, they don't have a clue what working families go through." MacDonald would like to see *The Simple Life* do a show about working at Wal-Mart. "I could see Paris Hilton on a register at Christmastime, or stocking shelves," she says. Or perhaps Alice Walton as a greeter, on her feet all day, thanking us for shopping at Wal-Mart. ■

WHAT HAPPENS TO AMERICA'S HIGH-TECH TRASH? ASK THE INMATES AT ATWATER PENITENTIARY.

Toxic Recycling

ELIZABETH GROSSMAN

CAITLIN DOVER

About ten miles northwest of Merced, amid the dairy farms and orchards of California's San Joaquin Valley, sits the Atwater Federal Penitentiary, its tower and low-slung buildings the same mustard yellow as the dry fields that stretch out beyond the chain-link fence and concertina wire toward the Sierra Nevadas. Inside this maximum-security prison, inmates smash computer monitors with hammers, releasing dust that contains lead, cadmium, barium and other toxic substances. These inmates are employed by the electronics recycling division of Federal Prison Industries (better known as UNICOR). With sales that have nearly tripled since 2002, electronics recycling is UNICOR's fastest-growing business. But according to reports from prisons where this work is being done and interviews with former inmates employed by UNICOR, it's taking place under conditions that pose serious hazards to prison staff and inmates—and, ultimately, to the rest of America and the world.

In late 2004 Leroy Smith, Atwater's former safety manager, filed a formal complaint with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. According to Smith, workers at Atwater's UNICOR facility are routinely exposed to dust from heavy metals. They were eating lunch in an area contaminated by lead, barium, beryllium and cadmium, he says, and using safety equipment that doesn't meet OSHA standards. Neither staff nor inmates were properly informed about the hazards, says Smith, who has more than a decade of experience with the Bureau of Prisons. After his superiors sent OSHA a report that downplayed and denied the problems, Smith sought whistleblower protection. He's now on paid leave while his lawsuit works its way through the Justice Department.

With $10 million of revenue in 2004, seven prison facilities and about 1,000 inmate employees who last year processed nearly 44 million pounds of electronic equipment, UNICOR is one of the country's largest electronics recyclers. There are about 400 electronics recyclers in the United States—a burgeoning industry that is vital to solving one of the information age's peskiest problems. Americans own more than 2 billion pieces of high-tech consumer electronics. With some 5 to 7 million tons of this stuff becoming obsolete each year, e-waste is now the fastest-growing part of the US municipal waste stream. It's the most challenging mass-produced trash we've ever had to deal with.

The cathode ray tubes (CRTs) in computer and television monitors contain lead, a neurotoxin, as do printed circuit boards. A typical desktop computer may contain up to eight pounds of lead. Mercury, another neurotoxin, is used in flat-panel display screens. Monitors contain cadmium, a known carcinogen. Circuit boards and exteriors use plastics containing flame retardants documented as disrupting thyroid hormone function and acting as neurotoxins in animals.

When high-tech equipment is intact, these substances are mostly harmless. But when digital devices are physically damaged—almost inevitable during disposal—the toxins emerge. By 2001 an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) report estimated that discarded electronics accounted for 70 percent of the heavy metals and 40 percent of the lead in US landfills. Synthetic chemicals used in electronics have been found in people, animals, food and household dust all around the world.

Elizabeth Grossman is the author of Watershed: The Undamming of America, Adventuring Along the Lewis & Clark Trail *and the forthcoming* High Tech Trash: Digital Devices, Hidden Toxins and Human Health.

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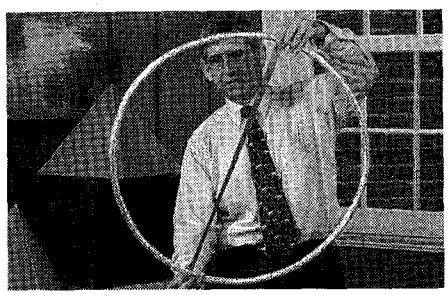

About Your Professor

Professor Michael Starbird is a distinguished and highly popular teacher with an uncommon talent for making the wonders of mathematics clear to non-mathematicians. He is Professor of Mathematics and a Distinguished Teaching Professor at The University of Texas at Austin, where he has received the President's Associates Teaching Award, the Jean Holloway Award for Teaching Excellence, and the Friar Society Centennial Teaching Fellowship.

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Given the hazards posed by landfilling and incinerating high-tech electronics, the safest way to dispose of them is to separate their materials, which can then be reprocessed as feedstock for new products. But these materials are tightly packed, largely unlabeled and of variable design, making that separation process both expensive and labor intensive.

That's where UNICOR comes in. The United States—unlike the European Union and several other countries, including Japan—has no national laws requiring electronics recycling. Yet over the past few years, individual states and local governments have begun enacting legislation to keep high-tech trash out of their landfills. At the same time, a growing number of businesses and organizations, concerned about the liabilities posed by dumping old computers, are opting to have equipment recycled. To save money many are sending equipment to UNICOR.

'Guys would be pulling junk out of their hair and eyebrows. We were coughing up...all sorts of nasty stuff and open wounds weren't healing.'

"UNICOR's program is labor intensive, so capital machinery and equipment expenses are minimized, this helps keep prices low," says a company brochure. With a captive workforce UNICOR's electronics recycling program can afford to be labor intensive. Because it is run by the Bureau of Prisons, UNICOR does not have to pay minimum wages—recent wages were $0.23 to $1.15 an hour—or provide benefits. Though UNICOR is not taxpayer supported, its pay scale would not be possible without taxpayer support of the inmates.

The savings payoff for UNICOR: In 2004 UNICOR's Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, prison facility won a contract from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection with a price one-quarter of that bid by private-sector recyclers. "I welcome the competition, but let's level the playing field," says Andy Niles of Scientific Recycling in Holmen, Wisconsin. Niles says he had to lay off about one-quarter of his staff after losing business to his state's prison industry.

"Busting up monitors exposes you to a lot more risk. But broken monitors saves on shipping costs," says Greg Sampson of Earth Protection Services, another private recycler. "Broken, you can fit about 100 into a carton, whereas only thirty-five or so will fit if they're intact. We don't break ours up." Neither do other private recyclers I contacted. "It's more expensive, but we pack them in lined boxes that are shipped with a manifest indicating hazardous material contents, and we use special machines to deactivate CRTs," explains Scott Sodenkamp, operations manager at the Noranda Recycling plant in Roseville, California. At Atwater, Leroy Smith told me, broken CRTs are packed in cardboard cartons and sealed with plastic wrap.

UNICOR doesn't just save money by busting up monitors and paying prison wages. Instead of investing in state-of-the-art disassembly equipment and durable safety gear, UNICOR reportedly distributed ball-peen hammers and cloth gloves to inmates working at Atwater. "The gloves ripped easily and there were lots of bad scratches and cuts," a former Atwater UNICOR worker told me. Staff and inmates who worked at UNICOR's Elkton, Ohio, and Texarkana, Texas, operations have similar accounts of broken glass, noxious dust and injuries resulting from inadequate tools.

UNICOR declined my request to visit the Atwater facility. But an OSHA inspector who toured it in late 2004 confirmed many of the inmates' complaints: "While conducting sampling, I observed, and numerous workers reported, the improper use of tools and techniques due to the lack of appropriate tools to more safely dismantle monitors."

"We were given light-particle dust masks and the stuff would get in behind them," the former Atwater inmate told me. "In the glass-breaking room, guys would be pulling junk out of their hair and eyebrows. We were coughing up and blowing out all sorts of nasty stuff, and open wounds weren't healing." The coveralls inmates wore on the job—kept on during breaks and meals—would come back from laundering with glass and metal dust in rolled cuffs, he says. Work boots were worn outside the factory, too, potentially contaminating other areas of the prison—something OSHA regulations are designed to avoid. Prison staff, say Smith and others, wear regular uniforms and shoes in the factory, allowing contaminated dust to be transferred to their cars, homes and families.

In 2002, air samples taken at Atwater found lead levels twice OSHA's permissible exposure level, and cadmium ten times the OSHA standard. Wipe samples found lead, cadmium and beryllium (which causes severe lung disease) on work surfaces and inmates' skin. Blood and urine testing found barium, cadmium and lead, some at elevated levels.

UNICOR's computer disassembly process releases so much lead, in fact, that its dust qualifies as hazardous waste. Smith and former staff at UNICOR's Elkton, Ohio, facility say this waste has been improperly handled. "Prison staff were removing the filters that collect the dust from the glass-breaking without wearing respirators, and putting these filters in the general prison trash," says Smith, who showed me photographs of worktables covered with thick layers of pale gray dust.

Because UNICOR works behind bars, it has another advantage over its competitors: It doesn't have to be prepared for unannounced OSHA inspections. And even though some factories opened in 1997, there were no OSHA inspections until 2004. The air tests in late 2004 found lead, barium and cadmium at Atwater—but below the levels at which OSHA requires the use of safety equipment. These test samples, however, were not taken around inmates "involved in the deliberate breaking of computer monitors," says the OSHA report. Even so, barium, beryllium, cadmium and lead were found on work surfaces; barium, cadmium and lead were found in the workers' dining area, creating the potential for accidental ingestion. But none of that violates OSHA standards. As the OSHA inspector noted, there are actually "no standards or regulatory levels for these metals on surfaces."

How toxic is the dust? Long-term exposure to low levels of cadmium damages kidneys and can lead to lung disease. Workers exposed to the levels of lead found in Atwater's air in 2002 would eventually have elevated blood lead levels—not enough to cause acute lead poisoning but plenty to cause kidney or neurological damage, according to leading environmental and occupational health scientists. "If a workplace has enough lead to fall near the

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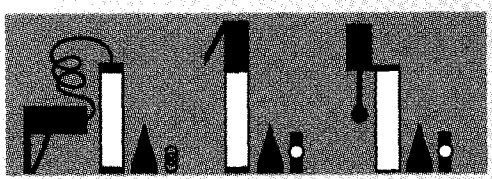

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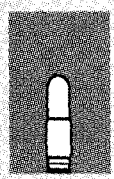

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OSHA standards, that would be enough to come home and pose a risk to children," says Howard Hu, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Inhalation exposure is the most dangerous in terms of getting lead into the body, Hu says. OSHA standards—and those now set by the EPA—likely allow far higher exposure than is truly safe. In fact, says Dr. Bruce Lanphear, director of the Children's Environmental Health Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, "there is no safe level."

Despite the recent surge of concern about data security, most people know little about where discarded digital equipment ends up. Great quantities of e-waste sent to domestic recyclers end up overseas—in China, Africa, Southeast and South Asia, and other developing regions—where much of it is processed cheaply, under unsafe and environmentally unsound conditions. To avoid this, many recyclers and their clients demand rigorous documentation of the downstream flow of dismantled equipment.

"Environmental stewardship and social responsibility are critical issues for our clients," says Robert Houghton of Redemtech, which recycles electronics for Fortune 500 companies. Redemtech considered working with UNICOR, Houghton told me, but chose not to because UNICOR could not provide the downstream accountability Redemtech's customers required.

UNICOR says that no material it recycles will be landfilled or exported for dumping. UNICOR's no-export policy prohibits shipping electronic waste to any country barred by the US government from receiving US products. These countries, UNICOR told me, are Cuba, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Libya, Sudan and Syria. But that leaves many countries to choose from, since US laws only prohibit exporting hazardous material destined for disposal—rather than recycling—or when it involves transfer of "sensitive" technology. "It's absolutely legal to send this stuff to Pakistan," says Houghton.

Much of what UNICOR recycles comes from the federal government, which buys about 7 percent of the world's computers and disposes of at least half a million each year. In 2002 the Defense Department sent some 17 million pounds of used electronics to UNICOR for recycling. UNICOR's website also lists several universities as clients. But some counted as customers no longer are—among them the University of Colorado, which wanted better documentation than UNICOR provided. Same with Johns Hopkins. "Using prison labor was not looked at very favorably," says a university employee who asked not to be named.

The United States is the only industrialized nation that uses prison labor for electronics recycling. "We can do without it, but are we willing to do without it?" asks Craig Lorch, whose company, Total Reclaim, is among the thirty or more that have pledged not to use prison labor. Until environmental and social benefits are given priority over the bottom line, UNICOR's low-cost option will continue to be used by the government and many others. But relying on workers who are not paid a living wage, and who work in unhealthy and environmentally unsound conditions, displaces rather than solves the e-waste problem. The long-term environmental costs cannot even be calculated. As long as the United States does not require transparency and accountability from recyclers, it will be impossible to know how these toxic materials are treated, or where they go. ■

FOR THE MOVEMENT TO GIVE ALL KIDS ACCESS TO PRE-K, CALIFORNIA IS GROUND ZERO.

Before School

DAVID L. KIRP

The scene at San Francisco's Grace Child Development Center could have been lifted straight from a feel-good movie. On a perfect summer day the cameras rolled and reporters crowded around as filmmaker and preschool activist Rob Reiner joined a table of 4-year-olds. He found himself talking about movies with a precocious girl named Diamond, who has ambitions to be a movie star—both Reiner and Diamond are fans of *The Cat in the Hat*—and April, a would-be doctor who can almost spell her name.

CAITLIN DOVER

Reiner was on hand to celebrate the launch of the city's universal pre-kindergarten program. Flanked by local politicians, he turned the occasion into a rally for a proposed measure that would guarantee access to a high-quality preschool for every 4-year-old in the state. The initiative will be on the June 2006 ballot. "Even though preschool isn't a sexy issue, it's a critical issue," he said. "If we don't make an investment in young children, we have no chance of reaching the society we want."

In recent years this message—that early education isn't something that should be left entirely to families; that the government also has an obligation to improve the lives of young children—has started to resonate with parents, voters and taxpayers. Publicly supported pre-kindergartens are proliferating nationwide. Four states (Florida, Oklahoma, Georgia and New York) now formally guarantee universal preschool, and thirty-seven others support some preschool programs.

"California is the future of this movement," says Karen Hill Scott, a child-development expert who has been deeply

David L. Kirp, professor of public policy at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of Shakespeare, Einstein and the Bottom Line, *is writing a book,* Before School, *about the universal preschool movement.*

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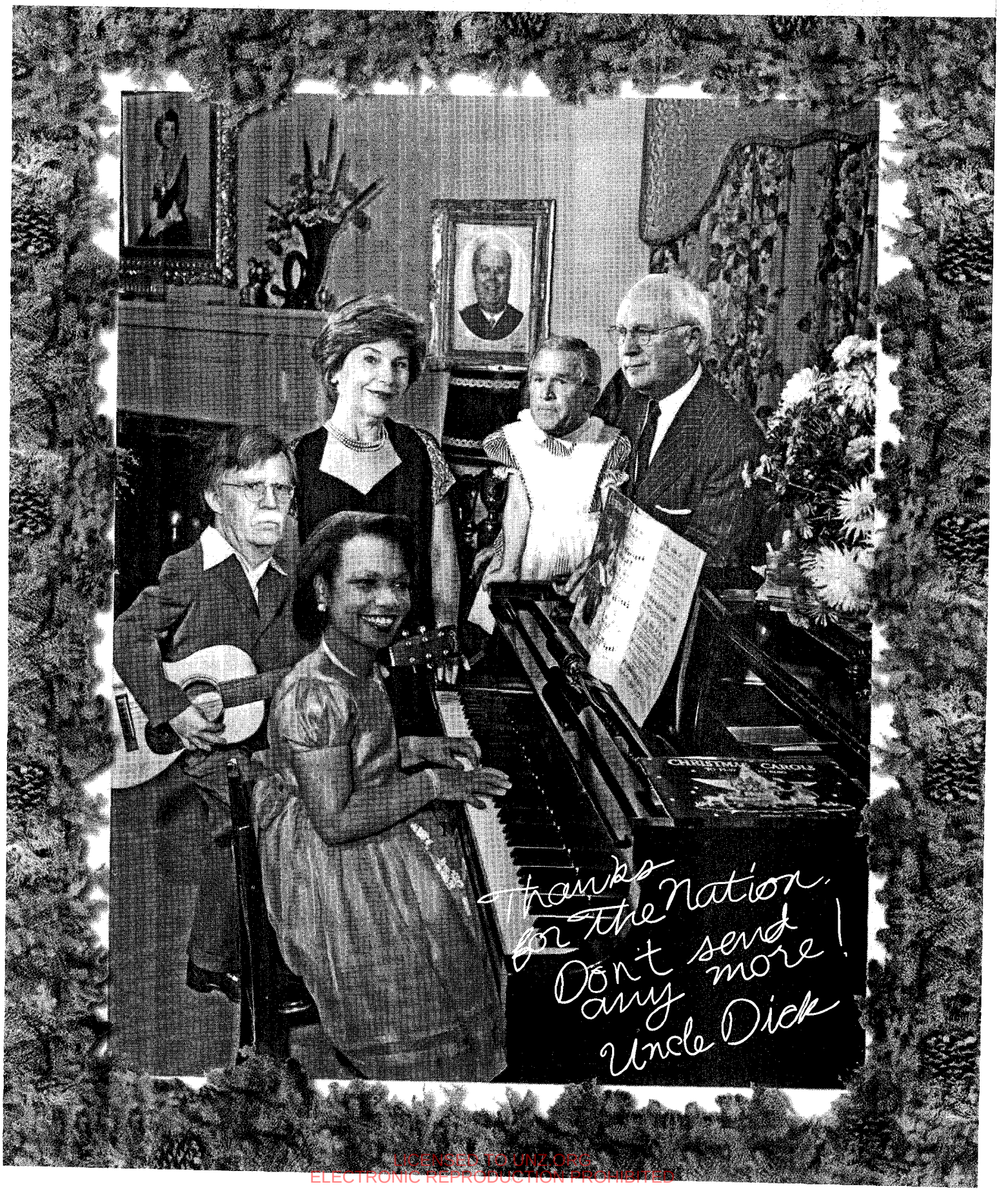
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involved in shaping preschool policy. "It's one of just a handful of states where the number of children is increasing. There are enough children under age 5 to constitute the seventh biggest state in the country." Because of the sheer magnitude of the preschool initiative—its $2.3 billion price tag is more than a third the size of the entire Head Start budget—as well as the state's outsized influence on national politics, a yes vote is a potential tipping point. Within a generation, preschool may be almost as commonplace as kindergarten—and preschool could become the entering wedge in a broader campaign to improve the lives of children.

The Power of Science

The ideological sea change, away from rugged individualism and toward greater public involvement in the service of the very young, stems less from altruism than enlightened self-interest. It owes a lot to the emerging research-based understanding of how the cognitive and emotional lives of children unfold.

Long-term studies of model programs like Abecedarian, in North Carolina, which provided an array of services to children from birth to age 5, and Chicago's Child-Parent Centers, demonstrate that young children reap the benefits for the rest of their lives—fewer repeat a grade or are assigned to special-education classes or get into trouble with the law; more graduate from high school.

The results of the Perry Preschool study are especially impressive. In 1962, before Head Start or the "war on poverty," fifty-eight African-American children from poor families enrolled in a preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan. There was a well-trained (and well-paid) teacher for every six youngsters, and in addition to the half-day classes, teachers met with parents for several hours a week. Because there were more applicants than the program could accommodate, a similar group of children was denied this experience, and that became the basis for one of the most famous social science experiments ever conducted.

Forty years later the ex-Perry students are middle-aged. Their median income is $20,800. That's 25 percent more than the average earnings of a matched group of children who didn't get this opportunity, the difference between an income that's above or below the poverty line. Not only earnings but life in general is better for the former preschoolers: 65 percent graduated from high school, compared with 45 percent of those who didn't go to Perry; 57 percent of males raised their own children, versus 30 percent of the nonpreschool group; 36 percent had been arrested five or more times, versus 55 percent for the control group.

That more than a third of the ex-preschoolers have been arrested at least five times is a useful reminder that pre-kindergarten isn't a panacea. Still, the 2004 analysis finds a spectacular $17 return, to society as well as to the former Perry students, for every dollar spent on their early education.

Like the other exemplary programs, Perry Preschool enrolled only disadvantaged children, who doubtless have the most to gain from the experience. Results from a recent study of Head Start, which enrolls three-quarters of a million 3- and 4-year-olds, lead to the same conclusion: A decently crafted program reduces the school readiness gap between poor and middle-class youngsters. But poor children aren't the only ones who benefit from preschool. A 2004 study finds that children enrolled in a universal pre-kindergarten program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, registered a 16 percent increase in language and cognitive test scores. Since Tulsa's preschools serve a socially and economically diverse population, this is a model that other communities can readily adopt.

Brain research has added the imprimatur of hard science to the argument for preschool. During the past fifteen years neuroscientists have effectively settled the ancient "nature versus nurture" debate. The research shows that genetic potential isn't fixed at birth but is shaped by the environment, especially during a child's first years—that there are "sensitive periods," windows of opportunity in early brain development.

Moreover, first experiences also become building blocks for what happens next in children's lives. "The early childhood years," the National Research Council concludes in its influential report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, "lay a foundation that influences the effectiveness of all subsequent education efforts."

This accumulated evidence, filtered through parenting magazines, books on the latest child-rearing techniques and over-the-fence chats, has led a majority of Americans to endorse the proposition that a good preschool is essential for 3- and 4-year-olds. Yet many working-class parents, including those pushed into the workforce by the welfare rule changes of the mid-1990s, have nowhere to send their young children. Because they earn more than poverty-line wages, they don't qualify for Head Start, but they can't afford the fees charged by qualified private providers. They are the backbone of a new movement.

Pre-K Gets Political

"Preschool for all" isn't just a slogan; it's hard work to design what amounts to a fourteenth grade—and politicians are tempted to take shortcuts. California's step-by-step, quality-first approach to expanding pre-kindergarten sends the right message. Preschool isn't baby-sitting with a fancy name. It can't be delivered on the cheap—as Florida is doing, spending a derisively low $2,500 annually for each 4-year-old. To make a lasting difference in the lives of children requires talented, well-educated and decently compensated teachers, as well as a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

The heavy political lifting in California is coming not from state officials but from well-connected activists like Rob Reiner—the "grass tops," as preschool advocates call them. Since 1978, when California voters endorsed the tax-cutting Proposition 13, the big policy decisions have been made by voters, through statewide ballot measures, rather than by Sacramento lawmakers. Conservatives have been especially adroit at turning this Progressive Era ideal of direct democracy into a tool for decimating government.

For liberals to succeed at direct democracy, they have had to persuade the voters that a goal like improving public education is too crucial to be left to the vagaries of state budgetary politics. "In convincing voters," says Geoff Garin, a pollster who has done work for California preschool advocates, "the question isn't only what's important but what's important enough to deserve a claim on public resources."

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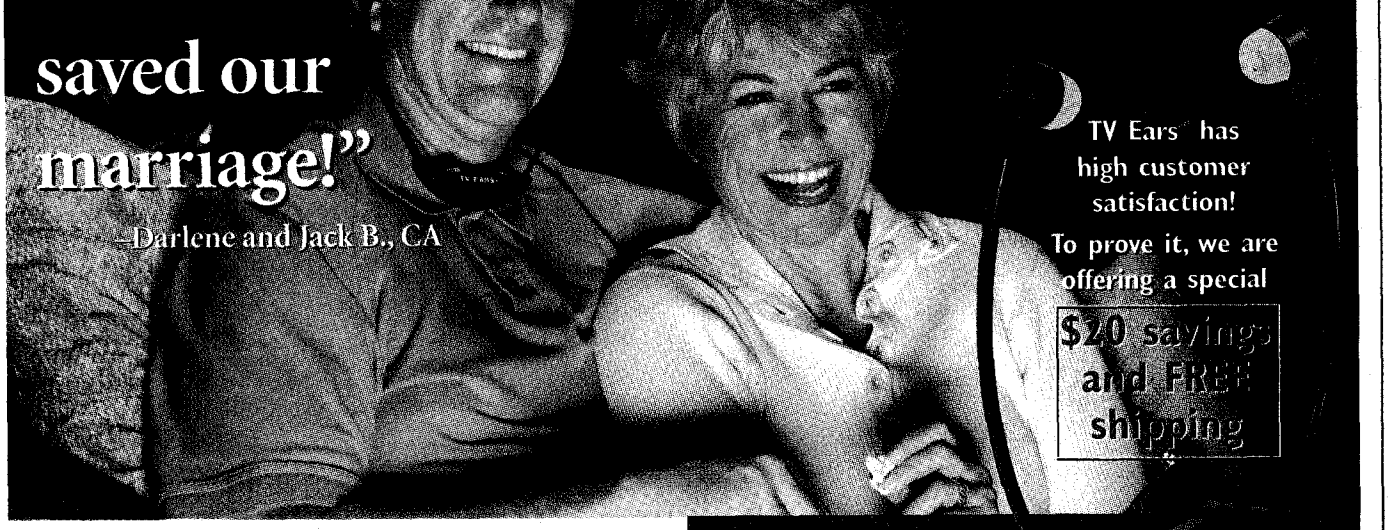

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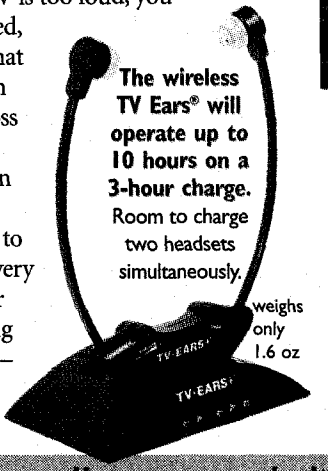

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Policy mavens and newspaper editorial writers fulminate about this ballot box budgeting, and they make an excellent point. "In a better world, relying on the initiative wouldn't be how I'd solve a major social problem," acknowledges former State Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg, who was unsuccessful in getting a modest preschool measure signed into law. Though Democrats in the legislature keep trying, it's a Sisyphean task. "Preschool won't happen legislatively for decades," predicts longtime legislative aide Joe Landon.

That's why the voters, not the lawmakers, will once again settle the issue. "We have a choice," says Chad Griffin, who for nearly ten years has worked with Reiner on early childhood concerns. "We can unilaterally disarm [by staying out of ballot box politics] and let the other side get everything, or we can meet them on the mat."

"If we believed that there was a chance to do this legislatively, we'd do it in a second," says Reiner. "In 1999, when the state was flush, I talked to [then-Governor] Gray Davis. He thought preschool was a great idea but that this wasn't the right time. For those politicians, it's never a right time."

A Universal Program Benefits Everyone

The push for universal pre-kindergarten in California grew out of a broader interest in improving young children's lives. In 1998 Reiner organized a broad coalition, including the Cancer Society and the American Heart Association, to back a first-in-the-nation initiative that would subsidize everything from home nurses' visits to childcare. The measure specified that funds would come from a 50 cent tax on every pack of cigarettes sold in the state, generating about $650 million a year, and this spurred the tobacco industry into furious opposition. Conservatives grumbled that the ballot measure subjected "public policy to the midlife crises of bloated Hollywood big shots." Although the tobacco companies raised more than $40 million, outspending the zero-to-five (pro–young children) forces by more than 4 to 1, the initiative passed. Two years later an industry-sponsored attempt to repeal it was overwhelmingly rejected.

"First Five is the national model," says Jane Henderson, former executive director of the First Five Commission. "Other states are jealous. 'That's California,' they say. 'They have the initiative and they have Rob Reiner.' But we don't have any political leadership." The state commission, which Reiner has chaired since its inception, parcels out 80 percent of the tobacco tax money to the state's fifty-eight counties, which are essentially free to spend those funds on anything that benefits youngsters.

With so many competing needs, money has been "sprinkled around," Henderson adds. "Pressure groups have pushed for everything from fluoridation to breast-feeding."

In order to focus the counties' efforts, First Five decided to make school readiness its priority—"that's really what zero-to-five is pointing to, the start of school," says Karen Hill Scott, a former member of the commission—and it has offered $400 million in matching funds to counties that expand their preschools.

The attention of preschool advocates nationwide is focused on Los Angeles. The county has committed $600 million in First Five funds for the next five years, with the goal of providing preschool to every 4-year-old. About 10 million people, nearly a third of the state's population, live in the county, including 153,000 4-year-olds. "That's more kids age 4 than there are kids, period, in most states," Scott points out. "If universal preschool can happen here, it can happen anywhere."

The Los Angeles Universal Preschool (called LAUP), which is managing the initiative, requires every pre-kindergarten to meet tough quality standards for teacher training and student-teacher ratios in order to merit extra money—and the better the preschool, the more money it's entitled to. "This is a universal program, not a poverty program," notes Peter Shakow, LAUP's vice president of communications. Initially, funds are going to increase the capacity and quality of preschools operating in "hot zones," the neighborhoods where the need is greatest. That strategy has generated citywide support.

Edison State Preschool, located in a strip-mall neighborhood on the proverbial wrong side of the tracks from classy Redondo Beach, is a LAUP-supported pre-kindergarten. The room is filled with picture books and art supplies, animals and blocks and the makings of science experiments; the teachers freely dispense ideas and hugs to their young charges. The day I visited, a cockatoo named Edison was ruling the roost, and dance music was in the air. It is the kind of place where you'd want to spend time if you were a kid.

The parents of these children are immigrants, attending English as a Second Language classes in the same building. Many of the youngsters at Edison have never spoken English. "Sometimes they won't say anything for five or six months," says Nancy Pekarek, the lead teacher. That's why she is using part of her First Five money to bring in an American Sign Language instructor one day a week, "so that they can have a common language."

The Electronic Bully Pulpit

Across the state, First Five's greatest success has been its use of the electronic bully pulpit to promote early childhood education. Since 2000 the commission has spent close to $50 million on TV public-service spots.

The campaign was crafted to open parents' eyes to the importance of early learning. In one spot the opening image shows a parent reading a book to her child; fast-forward to a shot of those kids, years later, reading big books themselves. "Education is more than school" is the theme: A park is a science lab, and a grocery store is a place to teach about math. Another promo tells a child's story in reverse, first showing a teenager going to college, then looking back to his high school years, with a basketball in his hands, and then back still further to preschool, where he is finger-painting. The most hard-hitting ad links crime prevention and pre-kindergarten. Two policemen, one of them African-American, tell parents there's something they can do now that will help keep their children out of the back of the police car later on—send them to preschool. "That ad was controversial," recalls Joseph Munso, former acting director of the commission. "It's also the one that people remember most."

This media campaign has made a discernible difference. In a 2004 poll three out of four Californians agreed that making preschool available to all interested parents is an important priority, and by a similar margin they said the state should fund

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these schools. A majority sees preschool as a priority that must be addressed now, not postponed until the K-12 system is improved. And 83 percent of parents who have young children would send them to a good state-funded pre-kindergarten.

In 2001 the populace was evenly divided about whether enough was being done to help preschoolers; just two years later more than six in ten believed that big changes were needed. And while in 2001 more than half of all parents thought it was better for children to stay home full-time, in 2003 two-thirds were convinced that preschool was the better option. The leading Democratic candidates for governor have both endorsed the initiative. Those are promising signs for the pre-school initiative.

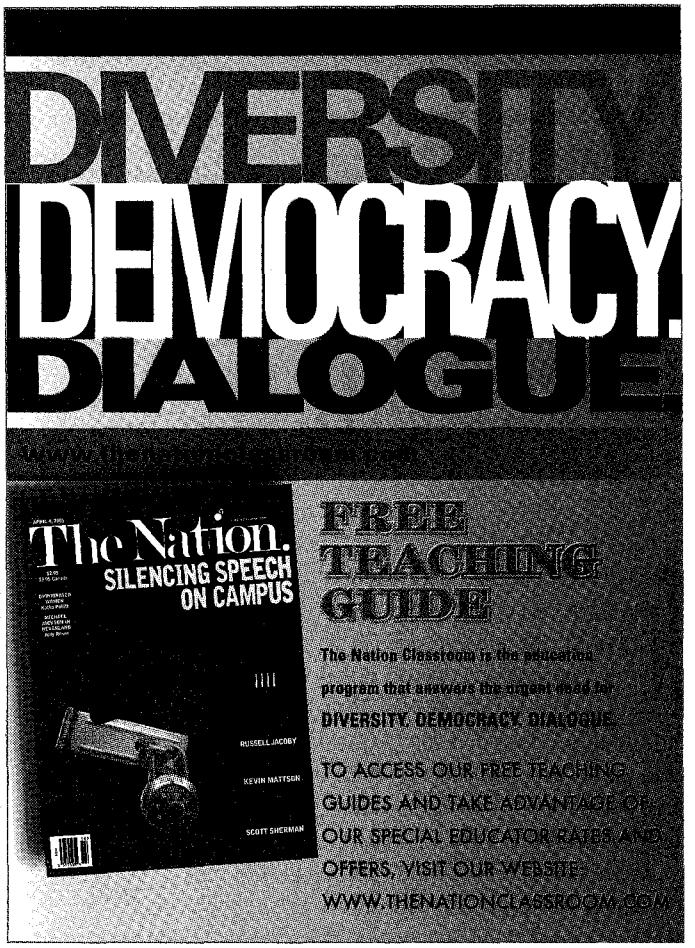
Public Preschool and Beyond

If Californians do vote yes, Rob Reiner deserves much of the credit. For nearly a decade he has been a forceful advocate for young children as well as a savvy political coalition-builder. While Preschool California, an advocacy group, was organizing statewide meetings to test the idea of universal preschool, he brought together a diverse group to hammer out the critical details. Among those at the table were: investor Michael Milken, who believes that competition is the best way to assure quality; childcare providers, who needed assurances that they wouldn't be frozen out; and the teachers' union, eager to add new members. Whenever there were threats to back out, Reiner was able to persuade the parties to put aside their parochial interests and concentrate on the needs of the children.

The ballot proposition that emerged from those discussions can be read as a blueprint for a good, though financially constricted, preschool program that guarantees a first-rate half-day class for every 4-year-old. While there's no disputing that a full-day program open to 3- as well as 4-year-olds would be educationally better, the cost seemed prohibitive. The initiative specifies a "developmentally appropriate" curriculum and sets a maximum of twenty children in a classroom. Within ten years every preschool teacher must have a BA degree as well as an early-learning credential. That regimen tracks the research on what's needed for an education that benefits young kids.

Critics have complained that the state, which has been struggling since the dot-com bust to remain solvent, can't afford a universal program. But a recent RAND Corporation report suggests that it's a sound investment: The report estimates that universal preschool in California will generate $2.62 in benefits for every dollar that's spent, and that by the time the first class of preschoolers is entering high school the investment will begin to pay off.

The initiative specifies that the preschools will be paid for by a new, 1.7 percent income tax on individuals earning more than $400,000 and couples making more than $800,000 (a 2004 initiative requires that millionaires pay a similar tax for mental health programs). This soak-the-rich approach has generated opposition from editorial writers and policy analysts—though not from focus groups, notes Maryann O'Sullivan, the CEO of Preschool California. "They said, 'It's not me who's going to pay.'" Now the drive is under way to raise the millions of dollars needed for the campaign.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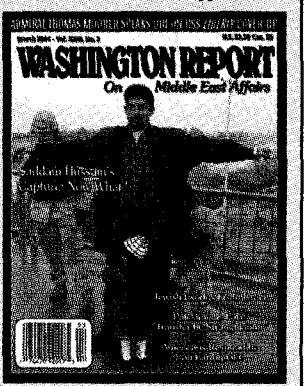

- **Israel's evacuation of its illegal settlements in Gaza.** Now Sharon is asking the United States to pay $2.2 billion in moving expenses (in addition to our regular payments of $3 billion a year). Why should Americans pay Israelis for leaving occupied land? We'd rather help refugees from Hurricane Katrina.
- **Israel's use of $2.3 billion of U.S. taxpayer dollars** to build a 400-mile-long separation barrier cutting deep into Palestinian territory, confiscating land, demolishing homes, markets, schools, fields, and isolating communities.
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O'Sullivan finds cause to cheer in Californians' growing awareness of the importance of early-childhood education and the responsibility of society to make it accessible to everyone. Even though the state is often regarded as the epitome of anomie, she says, "somewhere we are a cohesive society. Somewhere we care commonly about one another, not just about our own kids."

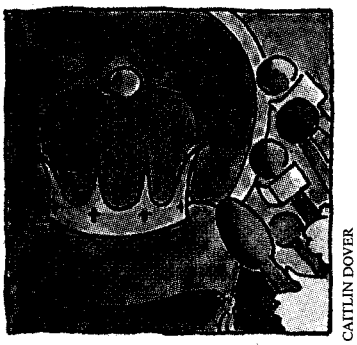
"Universal pre-kindergarten has a massive impact on a kid's development," says Reiner. "It's also a fulcrum, a point of leverage. Get 4-year-olds into preschool and you have an opportunity to show their parents the link between education and health; to get them interested in what happens with younger children; to work with them on parenting skills and motivate them to demand a better public school system." That sounds like an agenda, not just for California but for the nation. ■

KING GEORGE IS GOING DOWN—AND TAKING HIS PRESS COURTIERS WITH HIM.

All the King's Media

WILLIAM GREIDER

Amid the smoke and stench of burning careers, Washington feels a bit like the last days of the *ancien régime*. As the world's finest democracy, we do not do guillotines. But there are other less bloody rituals of humiliation, designed to reassure the populace that order is restored, the Republic cleansed. Let the perp walks begin. Whether the public feels reassured is another matter.



CAITLIN DOVER

George W. Bush's plight leads me to thoughts of Louis XV and his royal court in the eighteenth century. Politics may not have changed as much as modern pretensions assume. Like Bush, the French king was quite popular until he was scorned, stubbornly self-certain in his exercise of power yet strangely submissive to manipulation by his courtiers. Like Louis Quinze, our American magistrate (whose own position was secured through court intrigues, not elections) has lost the "royal touch." Certain influential cliques openly jeer the leader they not so long ago extolled; others gossip about royal tantrums and other symptoms of lost direction. The accusations stalking his important counselors and assembly leaders might even send some of them to jail. These political upsets might matter less if the government were not so inept at fulfilling its routine obligations, like storm relief. The king's sorry war drags on without resolution, with people still arguing over why exactly he started it. The staff of life—oil, not bread—has become punishingly expensive. The government is broke, borrowing formidable sums from rival nations. The king pretends nothing has changed.

The burnt odor in Washington is from the disintegrating authority of the governing classes. The public's darkest suspicions seem confirmed. Flagrant money corruption, deceitful communication of public plans and purposes, shocking incompetence—take your pick, all are involved. None are new to American politics, but they are potently fused in the present circumstances. A recent survey in Wisconsin found that only 6 percent of citizens believe their elected representatives serve the public interest. If they think that of state and local officials, what must they think of Washington?

We are witnessing, I suspect, something more momentous than the disgrace of another American President. Watergate was red hot, but always about Richard Nixon, Richard Nixon. This convergence of scandal and failure seems more systemic, less personal. The new political force for change is not the squeamish opposition party called the Democrats but a common disgust and anger at the sordidness embedded in our dysfunctional democracy. The wake from that disgust may prove broader than Watergate's (when democracy was supposedly restored by Nixon's exit), because the anger is also splashing over once-trusted elements of the establishment.

Heroic truth-tellers in the Watergate saga, the established media are now in disrepute, scandalized by unreliable "news" and over-intimate attachments to powerful court insiders. The major media stood too close to the throne, deferred too eagerly to the king's twisted version of reality and his lust for war. The institutions of "news" failed democracy on monumental matters. In fact, the contemporary system looks a lot more like the *ancien régime* than its practitioners realize. Control is top-down and centralized. Information is shaped (and tainted) by the proximity of leading news-gatherers to the royal court and by their great distance from people and ordinary experience.

People do find ways to inform themselves, as best they can, when the regular "news" is not reliable. In prerevolutionary France, independent newspapers were illegal—forbidden by the king—and books and pamphlets, rigorously censored by the government. Yet people developed a complex shadow system by which they learned what was really going on—the news that did not appear in official court pronouncements and privileged publications. Cultural historian Robert Darnton, in brilliantly original works like *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, has mapped the informal but politically potent news system by which Parisians of high and low status circulated court secrets or consumed the scandalous books known as *libelles*, along with subversive songs, poems and gossip, often leaked from within the king's own circle. News traveled in widening circles. Parisians gathered in favored cafes, designated park benches or exclusive salons, where the forbidden information was read aloud and copied by others to pass along. Parisians could choose for themselves which reality they believed. The power of the French throne was effectively fin-

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ished, one might say, once the king lost control of the news. (It was his successor, Louis XVI, who lost his head.)

Something similar, as Darnton noted, is occurring now in American society. The centralized institutions of press and broadcasting are being challenged and steadily eroded by widening circles of unlicensed "news" agents—from talk-radio hosts to Internet bloggers and others—who compete with the official press to be believed. These interlopers speak in a different language and from many different angles of vision. Less authoritative, but more democratic. The upheaval has only just begun, but already even the best newspapers are hemorrhaging circulation. Dan Gillmor, an influential pioneer and author of *We the Media*, thinks tomorrow's news, the reporting and production, will be "more of a conversation, or a seminar"—less top-down, and closer to how people really speak about their lives.

We are witnessing, I suspect, something more momentous than the disgrace of another American President.

Which brings us to the sappy operetta of the reporter and her influential source: Scooter Libby, the Vice President's now-indicted war wonk, and Judith Miller, the *New York Times*'s intrepid reporter and First Amendment martyr. What seems most shocking about their relationship is the intimacy. "Come back to work—and life," Scooter pleaded in a letter to Judy, doing her eighty-five days in jail. "Out west, where you vacation, the aspens will already be turning. They turn in clusters, because their roots connect them." Miller responded in her bizarre first-person *Times* account by telling a cherished memory of Scooter. Out West, she said, a man in sunglasses, dressed like a cowboy, approached and spoke to her: "Judy, it's Scooter Libby."

Are Washington reporters really *that* close to their sources? For her part, Miller has a "tropism toward powerful men," as *Times* columnist Maureen Dowd delicately put it. This is well-known gossip in court circles, but let's not go there. Boy reporters also suck up to powerful men with shameful deference, wanting to be loved by the insiders so they can be inside too (shades of the French courtiers). The price of intimacy is collected in various coins, but older hands in the news business understand what is being sold. The media, Christopher Dickey of *Newsweek* observed in a web essay, "long ago concluded having access to power is more important than speaking truth to it."

The elite press, like any narcissistic politician, tells a heartwarming myth about itself. Reporters, it is said, dig out the hard facts to share with the people by locating anonymous truth-tellers inside government. They then protect these sources from retaliation by refusing to name them, even at the cost of going to prison. That story line was utterly smashed by this scandal. Reporters were prepared to go to jail to protect sources who were not exactly whistleblowers cowering in anonymity. They were Libby and Karl Rove—the king's own counselors at the pinnacle of government. They were the same guys who collaborated on the bloodiest political deception of the Bush presidency: the lies that took the country into war. So, in a sense, the press was also protecting itself from further embarrassment. The major media, including the best newspapers, all got the war wrong, and for roughly the same reason—their compliant proximity to power. With a few honorable exceptions, they bought into the lies and led cheers for war. They ignored or downplayed the dissent from some military leaders and declined to explore tough questions posed by anyone outside the charmed circle. The nation may not soon forget this abuse of privileged status, nor should it.

Leaks and whispers are a daily routine of news-gathering in Washington. The sweet irony of President Bush's predicament is that it was partly self-induced. His White House deputies enforced discipline on reporters and insiders, essentially shutting down the stream of nonofficial communications and closing the informal portals for dissent and dispute within government. This was new in the Bush era, and it's ultimately been debilitating. It has made reporters still more dependent on the official spin, as the Administration wanted, but it has also sealed off the king from the flow of high-level leaks and informative background noises that help vet developing policies and steer reporters to the deeper news.

The paradox of our predicament is that, unlike the *ancien régime*, US citizens do enjoy free speech, free press and other rights to disturb the powerful. In this country you can say aloud or publish just about anything you like. But will anyone hear you? The audible range of diverse and rebellious voices has been visibly shrunk in the last generation. The corporate concentration of media ownership has put a deadening blanket over the usual cacophony of democracy, with dissenting voices screened for acceptability by young and often witless TV producers. Corporate owners have a strong stake in what gets said on their stations. Why piss off the President when you will need his good regard for so many things? Viewers have a zillion things to watch, but if you jump around the dial, with luck you will always be watching a General Electric channel.

How did it happen that the multiplication of outlets made possible by technology led to a concentration of views and opinions—ones usually anchored by the conventional wisdom of center-right sensibilities? Where did the "freedom" go? Where are the people's ideas and observations? Al Gore, who found his voice after he lost the presidency, recently expressed his sense of alarm: "I believe that American democracy is in grave danger. It is no longer possible to ignore the strangeness of our public discourse." The bread-and-circuses format that monopolizes the public's airwaves is driven by a condescending commercial calculation that Americans are too stupid to want anything more. But that assumption becomes fragile as other voices find other venues for expression. This is an industry crisis that will be very healthy for the society, a political opening to rearrange access and licensing for democratic purposes.

For the faltering press, the bloggers will keep sharpening their swords, slicing away at the established order. This is good, but the pressure will lead to meaningful change only if the Internet artisans innovate further, organizing new formats and

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techniques for networking among more diverse people and interests. The daily feed of facts and bile from bloggers has been wondrously effective in unmasking the pretensions of the big boys, but the broader society needs more—something closer to the democratic "conversations and seminars" that Gillmor envisions, and less dependent on partisan fury and accusation.

As an ex-Luddite, I came to the web with the skepticism of an old print guy. Against expectations, I am experiencing sustained exchanges with many far-flung people I've never met—dialogues that inform both of us and are utterly voluntary experiences. This is a promising new form of consent. Democracy, I once wrote, begins not at election time but in human conversation.

Establishment newspapers like the *New York Times* face a special dilemma, one they may not easily resolve. Under assault, do editors and reporters align still more closely with the establishment interests to maintain an air of "authority," or do they get down with folks and dish it out to the powerful? Scandal and crisis compelled the *Times* to lower its veil of authority a bit and acknowledge error (a shocking development itself). But while the *Times* is in my view the best, most interesting newspaper, it always will be establishment. For instance, it could be more honest about its longstanding newsroom tensions between "liberals" and "neocons." What the editors might re-examine is their own defensive concept of what's authoritative. It is not just Bush's war that blinded sober judgment and led to narrow coverage. In many other important areas—political decay and global economics, among others—the *Times* (like other elite papers) seems afraid to acknowledge that wider, more fundamental debate exists. It chooses to report only one side—the side of received elite opinion.

Readers do understand—surprise!—that the *Times* is not infallible. A newspaper comes out every day and gets something wrong. Tomorrow, it comes out again and can try to get it right. In essence, that is what people and critics already know. They are more likely to be forgiving if the newspaper loosens up a bit and makes room for more divergent understandings of what's happening. But as more irreverent voices elbow their way into the "news" system, the big media are likely to lose still more audience if they cannot get more distance from throne and power.

What will come of all this? Possibly, not much. The cluster of scandals and breakdown may simply feed the people's alienation and resignation. The governing elites, including major media, are in denial, unwilling to speak honestly about the perilous economic circumstances ahead, the burgeoning debt from global trade, the sinking of the working class and other threatening conditions. When those realities surface, many American lives will be upended with no available recourse and no one in authority they can trust, since the denial and evasion are bipartisan. That's a very dangerous situation for a society—an invitation to irrational angers and scapegoating. It will require a new, more encompassing politics to avert an ugly political contagion. We need more reliable "news" to recover democracy. ■

LETTERS
CONTINUED

(Continued From Page 2)

Free the Slaves and Bales have debunked the myth that slavery is just about sex. Bales's book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* was the first to demonstrate how modern slavery permeates the global economy and that the majority of the world's slaves work in agriculture, mining and elsewhere. Nathan suggests that Free the Slaves has an ax to grind. She is right; it is this: Slavery is too high a price to pay for cheap goods. JOLENE SMITH

Executive director, Free the Slaves

NATHAN REPLIES

New York City

■ Jolene Smith's criticisms are based on semantic sleight of hand. An analogy: In an imaginary election the media report that candidate X was the favorite at the largest number of polling places. We would assume that X won. But we'd be wrong, because X did not get the most votes or even win at most of the polling places. The sites that went for her were in sparsely populated areas like North Dakota. Moreover, this was not a two-person race; there were five other contenders, many of whom did well in densely populated places, say, on the East Coast. Each won fewer polling places than X, and some got fewer votes, but taken as a group, they outstripped her in both respects. That's how Free the Slaves' sex trafficking rhetoric works. *Hidden Slaves*, the study Smith mentions that her organization co-produced, says prostitution is the largest US category of forced labor. *Hidden Slaves*' own data suggest that sex trafficking cases generally contain a handful of victims compared with other categories, which tend to each have scores or hundreds of victims. Thus, two farmworker and three sweatshop cases could easily have a total of 800 victims, while eight prostitution cases might have only seventeen victims. But in terms of number of cases, "prostitution" is publicized as the largest category.

Hidden Slaves also breaks forced "nonprostitution" work into several subdivisions: agricultural, sweatshop, domestic service and so on. If all these pieces are recombined, it's obvious that most trafficking victims aren't prostitutes and that prostitution doesn't even predominate as a case category. But *Hidden Slaves* says otherwise. And it's technically right—just as the media were right when they said X won the largest number of polling places. The ILO's study performs similar language tricks—which result in governments, the media and the public obsessing about sex slavery while virtually ignoring other types of exploitation.

Smith is right that I neglected to mention that Free the Slaves president Kevin Bales and several other employees, including Smith herself, did *Hidden Slaves* with UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center. Sorry about that. Now I wonder if the HRC will clarify the murky, misleading representations discussed here. The center might want to distance itself from some of Bales's public assertions, which go far beyond *Hidden Slaves*' findings (see http://slate.msn.com/id/2120553/). *Hidden Slaves* estimates that there are 10,000 US trafficking victims, doing all kinds of work. But at an NYU forum this year, Bales reckoned 40,000, and that's just prostitutes. In the *New York Times* last year he said 50,000.

As Smith must know, slavery is related to, yet different from, trafficking. Bales often says that 27 million people worldwide are slaves. And he does add that most of them labor in non-sex venues. But most of this horror takes place in victims' own countries. Only 2 million have been moved across international borders, according to Bales's estimates. That transport is what defines trafficking. Free the Slaves' website links to an article from the evangelical *Christianity Today* warning that "two million people are enslaved by the international sex market." By Bales's reckoning that would be not just the majority of trafficking victims worldwide but the totality. Smith should edit her group's URLs. DEBBIE NATHAN

WORKMEN'S CIRCLE—PROGRESSIVE!

A transmission error in Victor Navasky's "State of the Magazines" [Nov. 14] rendered the Workmen's Circle as a conservative group rather than, of course, a *progressive* one.

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By Vincent Carretta.
Georgia. 436 pp. $29.95.

In 1999 the readers of *Slavery and Abolition*, a scholarly historical journal, were startled to learn that according to a respected editor, one of the foundational "slave narratives" might not be all that it purported to be. The text in question was *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself.* Vincent Carretta, the diligent editor of a new edition of the work for Penguin Classics, had come to doubt whether Gustavus Vassa, who went by the name Equiano, had really been born in Africa, captured as a boy and transported to the New World, as he claimed in the *Narrative*. In his *Slavery and Abolition* article, Carretta explained that his research had led him to believe Equiano had probably been born in South Carolina, and that his account of an African childhood was a vivid piece of imaginative reconstruction, a reconstruction that perfectly suited the needs of an abolitionist movement then principally focused on the evils of the Atlantic slave trade.

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano first appeared in London in 1789 and went through nine editions, one of them in New York, over the next six years. The stark account given by Equiano of the horrifying conditions on board the slave ship could be corroborated from many other sources, notably the rueful memoirs of slave trading captains who had come to repent their former profession. But abolitionists and, more recently, historians were pleased to be able to cite someone who was a victim as well as an eyewitness. The first modern edition of the *Narrative* appeared in 1969, and it was subsequently much reprinted and excerpted. Henry Louis Gates Jr. included it in his collection *The Classic Slave Narratives*, and filmmakers have based reconstructions on its account.

Carretta, who has written a full-dress biography of Olaudah Equiano, confesses that he "never expected, indeed, never wanted" to debunk his subject's account of his origins. Of course, Carretta—a professor of English at the University of Maryland who has written extensively on slave narratives—still sees extraordinary literary and historical value in Equiano's writings. The man formerly known as Gustavus Vassa was indeed a slave for many years—longer than was previously thought, if Carretta is right. He eventually purchased his own freedom, and his account of an extraordinary series of experiences and adventures can be independently corroborated at many points.

Carretta does not doubt that Equiano wrote authoritatively on slavery and the slave trade, or that he fully deserved his prominent role in the antislavery movement. As the editor of the Penguin edition, he was impressed by how accurate the *Narrative* was, even when the author was recalling events after a lapse of twenty or thirty years. As both a slave and a freeman, Equiano had sailed on dozens of ships in the Atlantic and Caribbean. He served on Royal Navy warships that fought crucial engagements in the Seven Years' War of 1756–63, served as an assistant to a famous naval inventor and sailed on a major Arctic expedition to find a Northwest Passage. Sold as a slave to a Caribbean merchant, he eventually persuaded his owner to honor a pledge to let him purchase his freedom. Equiano then traveled to Italy and Turkey, helped supervise slaves in Central America and met with General James Wolfe and the preacher George Whitefield. Equiano later established contact with such leading abolitionists as Granville Sharp and James Ramsay. Carretta

Robin Blackburn, distinguished professor in the graduate faculty of the New School and former editor of New Left Review, *is the author of* Banking on Death: Or, Investing in Life: The History and Future of Pensions; The Making of New World Slavery; *and* The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, *all published by Verso.*

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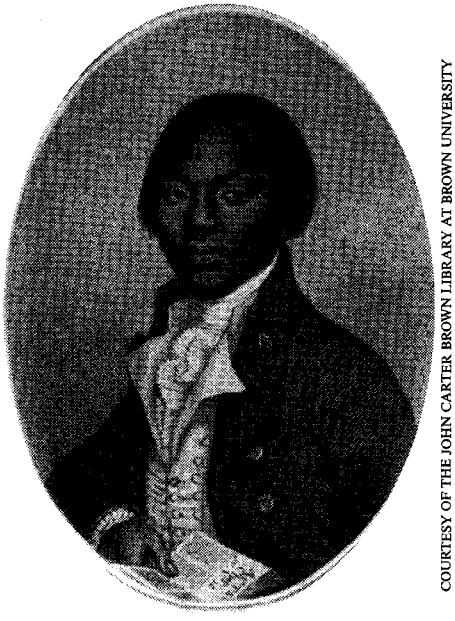
was able to check out Equiano's story by combing through logbooks, muster rolls and baptismal registers. He could, in other words, confirm almost every step in the story—except, crucially, the circumstances of Equiano's birth and enslavement.

The muster roll for the Arctic voyage and the record of Equiano's baptism both described him as born in Carolina. Though the entries were not directly made by Equiano, they are likely to have reflected information he had supplied. Other black seamen signing on for the Arctic trip were described as African-born, suggesting that such origins were not a problem. Carretta also notes that a few short passages in the long book had been lifted from other sources. In his warm evocation of the Igbo society in which he claimed to have been raised in Africa, Equiano explicitly relied on secondary sources, pleading his need to supplement his own "imperfect" memory of events that occurred when he was 7 or 8 years old. Carretta also finds that Equiano's first visit to England was two years earlier than he recounts in the *Narrative*, perhaps in an effort to raise his age at capture from 8 to 10.

Carretta does not believe that he has assembled a conclusive case; still less does he believe that Equiano's possible American birth undermines the importance of the *Narrative*. If Equiano embroidered his tale he would scarcely be the first memoirist to have done so. Indeed, Carretta insists that all autobiography requires great selectivity and skillful self-presentation. Frederick Douglass, at different periods of his life, famously gave different versions of his fight with the ruthless overseer Covey. Every text used by historians contains (or conceals) purposes other than the neutral disclosure of truth. To imagine that guile and deception were of no use to slaves and former slaves would be ridiculous, as the Brer Rabbit stories show.

While the question of Equiano's birthplace is not an insignificant detail, his testimony remains indispensable. Carretta does not dispute that Equiano must have been, as he described himself, a "son of Africa." Even if he was American-born, he is still likely to have been raised by African parents and to have imbibed African lore and oral history. In fact, his account gives a generally more positive image of Igbo society than he would have found by consulting the secondary sources. When a proslavery writer claimed that Equiano was not African but had been born in the Danish West Indies, he replied that there were, still living, highly respectable people who had known him as a boy—such as his former master's cousin—who could attest that at first he scarcely spoke any English. It is certainly striking that Equiano's story was universally accepted by those who knew him, including his African friends. It is possible that he spoke with a trace of an African accent, and that this made an African origin plausible to so many. Carretta anticipates such an objection by claiming that a childhood in Carolina might have left Equiano speaking an African language and little or no English. But while a boy raised in Carolina would have spoken Gullah, a Creole patois, would this have left him with an African accent?



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Frontispiece from the first edition of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (London, 1789)

Carretta quotes the great antislavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson imagining himself in conversation with a captive African in an essay published in 1786: "We shall throw a considerable part of our information on this head into the form of a narrative: we shall suppose ourselves, in short, on the continent of Africa, and relate a scene, which, from its agreement with unquestionable facts, might not unreasonably be presumed to have been presented to our view, had we really been there." This passage, almost certainly known to Equiano, might have offered encouragement to his own reconstruction. However, Carretta writes that in 1779, Equiano first claimed to have been born in Africa, long before the campaign against the slave trade, in a letter to the bishop of London seeking employment in Africa.

Carretta suggests that we will never know for sure where Equiano was born. He has obviously done a great service in documenting the discrepancies in the record and in setting out his own doubts. But he might have assembled all his evidence and arguments together in one place in this book instead of scattering relevant information throughout the text. And in telling the story he sticks to Equiano's account, with initial chapters on Africa and the Middle Passage. He does not suggest how a boy born in Carolina would have been available for purchase in Virginia at the age of 8 or 9.

Still, Carretta has written a fascinating book. He is at pains to point out that the *Narrative* is a very accomplished work and an essential document, as readers of the time were quick to recognize. Equiano's *Narrative* made him known to a wide public in the English-speaking world (translations of the book also appeared in several other languages). Equiano retained copyright to the book and supervised every aspect of its publication. He organized its printing, commissioned a handsome portrait to serve as a frontispiece and sold the finished product both to booksellers and to the audiences who attended his tireless speaking tours. As Carretta has it, Equiano was in every sense a "self-made man." He married an Englishwoman, with whom he had two daughters. His legacy to his surviving daughter, who married a Congregational minister, was the considerable sum of £950.

The *Narrative* is also by far the most comprehensive firsthand account of a black seafarer in the eighteenth century. Equiano spent about seven years as a youngster aboard ships of the Royal Navy, as the slave-servant of Michael Henry Pascal, his owner, who was the descendant of Huguenots. He made friends among the English boys who helped form their crews and, like them, had the opportunity to learn how to read, write and do sums. By the end of 1762 Equiano, though technically still a slave, was promoted to the rank of able seaman. He was terribly shocked when his master, whom he regarded as a father figure, sent him to the West Indies to be sold to James Doran, captain of a merchant ship. Doran, in turn, sold the young man to another merchant, a Quaker named Robert King. Appreciative of Equiano's skill, King entrusted him with responsible missions and hired him out as a sailor on merchant vessels. He also promised him that if he could raise the sum of £40, he could buy his freedom. With bonuses and skillful trading on his own account, Equiano soon accumulated the necessary sum. His master was shamed into keeping the bargain only when Equiano brought along another captain to witness his formal request that his master keep to his word.

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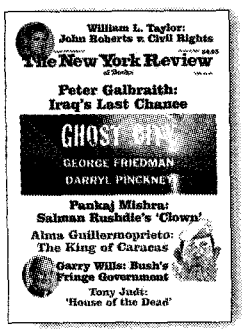

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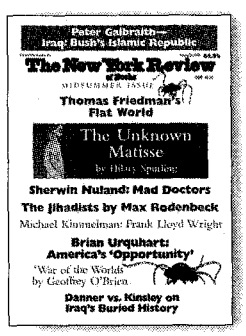

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Equiano spent a few years as a free black in the West Indies, occasionally visiting North American ports. While he seems to have usually gotten along with white shipmates, he often sparred with white traders ashore who tried to chisel and shortchange him. His work sometimes involved crewing on ships that were transporting small numbers of slaves in the local trade. On one occasion it fell to him to take command of a ship in a storm when the captain proved incompetent. The ship had to be beached, and this brush with death induced a spiritual crisis. Equiano secured the services of a leading illustrator to supply a picture of this episode in his *Narrative*.

Equiano was, among his many accomplishments, a good horn player, which may account for his acquaintance with the very musical abolitionist pioneer Granville Sharp. It seems to have been Equiano who alerted Sharp to the notorious *Zong* case, in which a captain threw sick and dying slaves overboard in order to claim the insurance on them. Equiano was also friendly with senior figures in the Admiralty, several of whom were strongly opposed to the slave trade, both on general principle and because it was a graveyard of British sailors. Connections such as this led to Equiano's appointment as the British government's official commissary in 1786 in a scheme to resettle poor blacks in Sierra Leone. However, Equiano was soon accused of stirring up discontent among blacks and dismissed from his post. Interestingly, this affair did not sour his relations with prominent abolitionists like James Ramsay, who believed that he had been the target of prejudice.

Equiano invoked a well-chosen array of Bible quotes in his battles with slavery apologists prior to the publication of the *Narrative*. His professions of faith no doubt pleased his abolitionist sponsors, but his polemics were often more adventurous than those of his mentors. When a planter's representative urged a ban on marriage between white and black, Equiano riposted:

> Why not establish intermarriages at home, and in our Colonies? and encourage open, free, and generous love upon Nature's own wide and extensive plan, subservient only to moral rectitude, without distinction of the colour of a skin?... That ancient, most wise, and inspired politician, Moses...established marriage with strangers by his own example.... Away then with your narrow impolitic notion of preventing by law what will be a national honour, national strength, and productive of national virtue—Intermarriages!

Equiano persuaded an impressive bevy of aristocrats to subscribe to his *Narrative*, many of them linked to the Prince of Wales. But he also shared a house with Thomas Hardy, one of the leaders of the very radical London Corresponding Society. In a letter to Hardy sent while he was away on one of his book tours, he suggests men who might be recruited to the democratic cause. The abolitionist campaign had very respectable backing but also strong support from many radical artisans.

One of the first writers to review Equiano's *Narrative* was Mary Wollstonecraft, whose reaction was mixed. She wrote that "the whole account of his unwearied endeavours to obtain his freedom is very interesting." But she found his "long account of his religious sentiments" to be "rather tiresome" and was not impressed by the stories of his "insignificant cares" as a free black. Indeed, it is a little disappointing that Wollstonecraft considers it a defect that the *Narrative* placed Equiano "on a par with the general mass of men, who fill the subordinate stations."

Carretta, for his part, stresses Equiano's

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self-presentation as a "gentleman," a term referring to education and culture rather than birth. Yet the *Narrative* also gives us many glimpses of life below decks and of the entertainments and dances of those Equiano calls "my people," as they played the "catguts" under the palm trees. He is not so concerned to project a pious and God-fearing profile that he neglects to mention he became more interesting to the "sable females" once he had won his freedom. While he cultivated the style and dignity of a gentleman who could quote Milton and Shakespeare as well as the Bible, he did not shy away from verbal brawls. The man evoked by Carretta the biographer had a fervent self-regard that does not entirely fit the scheme suspected by the author of the article in *Slavery and Abolition*. Still, Carretta paints a portrait of a proud, assertive man of stubborn intensity that is richer and more rounded than the hero of the *Narrative*.

As for the ethical questions raised by Equiano's apparent fabrications, any consideration must start from the fact that black people were in a state of open or latent war against a massive institutional attempt to deny them their rights. A powerful instrument of the abolitionist cause in the 1790s, Equiano's *Narrative* would have had much less of an impact if its author had been American-born. The British journalist Claud Cockburn liked to boast about inventing a report from Civil War Spain on an "uprising in Tetuan," a bastion of Franco's rebellion. News of the uprising was timed to head off an imminent diplomatic capitulation by the Western democracies. The moral was that in a life-and-death struggle with fascism a little journalistic subterfuge was sometimes essential. There was no lack of motive in Equiano's case.

But as Carretta concedes, there was a great risk, if the author was really born in the Carolinas, that this particular "Tetuan incident" would be unmasked before it had served its purpose. Equiano must have known that there were powerful people out to discredit him. Had he never mentioned to anyone he was born in Carolina? Were no friends or descendants of the Virginia planter who had sold him still alive? Carretta believes that the great success of the "African" sections of the *Narrative* shows that if the author was not born in Africa, then he must have spoken with so many who were that he convincingly absorbed and reproduced their outlook. Carretta has done some very skillful sleuthing and presents evidence that can be interpreted in different ways. Ultimately, readers will have to decide for themselves. ■

The Power of Fear

RUSSELL SHORTO

NEW YORK BURNING: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan. By Jill Lepore. Knopf. 323 pp. $26.95.

It may be that, in some ultimate sense, we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Then again, fear is a pretty all-encompassing foe. It is also, and always has been, a political tool. If Islamic terrorism is today's unseen source of collective fear, at once justified and manipulated, in the first half of the eighteenth century it was the slave revolt. Anyone familiar with New York's colonial history has likely come across an event that is typically referred to as "the so-called slave rebellion of 1741." The qualifier says two things: The facticity of the facts is in question, and the real story is either too complicated to go into in detail or its features have been swallowed up by time. Jill Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard, has taken it upon herself to excavate the ground beneath the "so-called," and she has unearthed two varieties of grimly fascinating stuff. The first is slavery itself: Hers is the sort of photo-realistic portrait of a time and place that shows the shoulder-rubbing closeness of blacks and whites coexisting in the most naked form of inequality; the detailing is fine enough that you can see the RN, for "runaway," branded into the black shoulder.

The other—Lepore's main subject, and the reason this book ought to be read even by those with no particular taste for colonial history—is the complex dance of power and fear. The basic facts are these: In March and April of 1741, a series of ten fires erupted in Lower Manhattan, the most significant one within the walls of the fort at the southern tip of the island, the center of power in the British colony of New York. A plot was uncovered: Slaves, together with some downtrodden whites, were found to have conspired to burn down the whole city and murder the white population. Arrests were made: 152 blacks and twenty whites. A trial was held; people were convicted and sentenced. Thirty black men were hanged or burned at the stake; two white men and two white women were hanged. The bodies of two supposed ringleaders, one black and one white, were gibbeted, the corpses left to rot for weeks on public display. One resident called the episode the "Bonfires of the Negros."

The word "unfair" can hardly do justice to the treatment visited upon New York's slave population in the aftermath of the fires. The episode might be dismissed as an outcome of a cruder age were it not reminiscent of more recent terrorist detainments. Literally every lawyer in New York was engaged on the side of the prosecution, while the defendants—the city's official nonpeople—had no representation at all. Confessions were extracted at the stake. And as the confessions piled up, they lent themselves to a conspiracy theory of fantastical proportions. The richest white New Yorkers were to have been murdered; the slaves would become the masters. The royal governor of New York was to be replaced by a slave—named Caesar, no less.

The prosecutors wove all of this into a horrific tale of topsy-turvy, but they didn't stop there. The decorative wrapping on the conspiracy theory was that the whole black-on-white uprising was really orchestrated from Rome. It was a papist plot on white Protestant civilization, with blacks acting as the pope's minions and a disguised Catholic priest ("To be a Roman Catholic priest was illegal in New York in 1741," Lepore notes, "a crime punishable by death") as their field captain.

The ungainly plot began to unravel even before the first bodies swung. The comic absurdity—the fact that such a tortured piling-on of invention could be believed long enough to convict—points to the special nature of the threat and to the fear that those in power manipulated. But the credulity of New York's elite also betrayed an implicit understanding that their heavy exertion of power over the relatively powerless would result not in an equal and opposite reaction but in an

Russell Shorto writes regularly for The New York Times Magazine. *He is the author, most recently, of* The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan, the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America *(Doubleday).*

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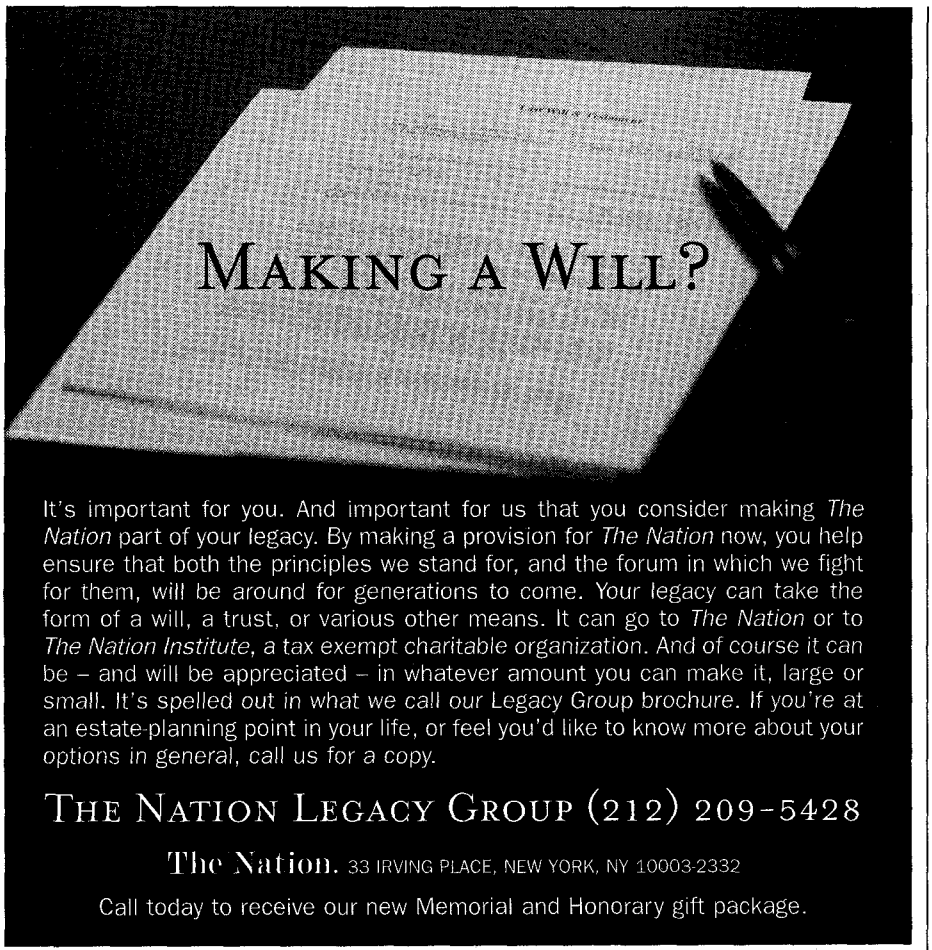
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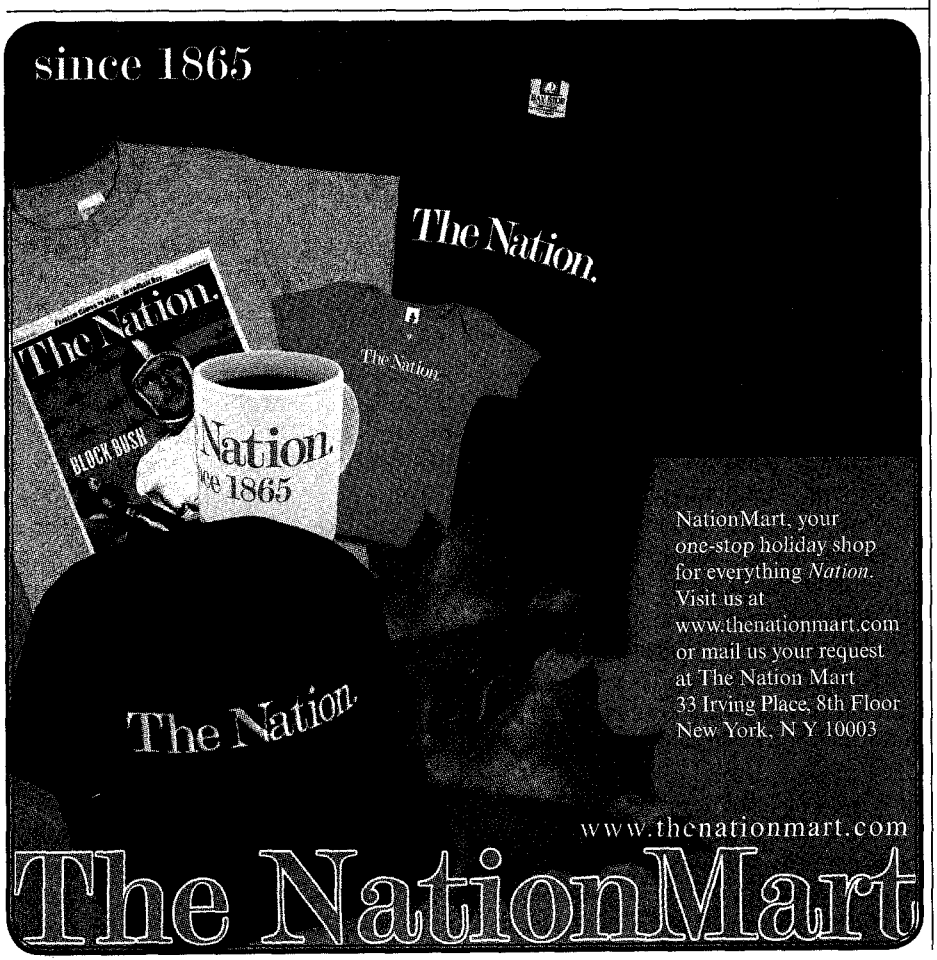
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asymmetrical one. One person's terrorism is another's struggle to be free, and during slavery's heyday the lurking, grinding fear in every white colonial mind was of smoke, flame and the flashing blade: the slave uprising.

Uprisings did happen. One had occurred in New York in 1712, another on Antigua in 1736. And less than two years before the episode in question came the so-called Stono Rebellion, in which 100 or so slaves armed themselves and marched south from Charleston, South Carolina, toward Florida, where they may have hoped to win freedom under the Spanish there. Before being hunted down, they torched and murdered and otherwise burnished the fear that gleamed in the heart of white society.

By one reckoning, then, the slaves in New York in 1741 were simply following a well-established model of revolt. But the scope of the plot presented by the prosecution, the elaborate and painstaking stitching-together, points to something else. This is what Lepore is after. The story as she tells it weaves together three seemingly disparate episodes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: the 1692 Salem witch trials, the free-press trial of John Peter Zenger in 1735 and the events of 1741. The last two of these events point toward the American Revolution. Their legacy is still with us.

The chain connecting the Salem witch trials and the "Bonfires of the Negros" (not to mention the 2001 Patriot Act) is mass hysteria: the conviction that a dark enemy lurks among us and extraordinary measures must be taken to defeat it. Some in 1741 saw the connection to what was then a shameful occurrence in the not-so-distant past, and regretted it. The events surrounding the Zenger trial, meanwhile, bear directly on 1741, in Lepore's reckoning, and amplify what has long seemed a grim but small event in American colonial history.

In the 1730s there were no political parties in America. The British governor of a colony was its politics. With the arrival in 1732 of William Cosby as New York's governor, however, the colony undertook its first experiment in organized political opposition. Cosby's abuses and excesses were such that some influential New Yorkers, led by James Alexander, a bewigged lawyer who also just happened to be the city's second-wealthiest taxpayer, floated the radical idea that political parties, formerly seen as fatally divisive,

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might be beneficial. Alexander set up Zenger, a printer, as publisher of a newspaper—the *New-York Weekly Journal*—that was to be a first: an opposition mouthpiece. Cosby arrested Zenger for printing "seditious paragraphs" about him. The subsequent trial was historic because of the radical and novel arguments the defense advanced: that Zenger should be let off since what he printed about the governor was true; and that a free press was an inherently good thing.

Zenger was acquitted, and in the minds of the British rulers a dangerous precedent was established: the idea of a legitimate opposition, a "Country Party" against the "Court Party." In Lepore's reading, this, combined with the heavy weight of slavery on colonial life, formed the backdrop to the events of 1741, and these two episodes foreshadowed the revolution that was to come: "Slaves suspected of conspiracy constituted both a phantom political party and an ever-threatening revolution."

Lepore thus sees the 1741 trial of slaves and poor whites as a reaction to the political upheavals that had shaken the city in the previous decade. Certainly the same people played roles in both. The lead prosecutor in 1741, Daniel Horsmanden, was Chief Justice of New York's Supreme Court; in the 1730s he had been city recorder, Governor Cosby's right-hand man.

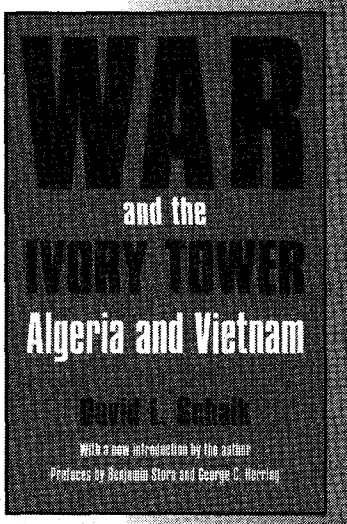
There may well have been a meeting of slaves and poor whites in John Hughson's tavern, and a plan to set fire to the fort. But what Horsmanden came up with as he carried out his investigation, and what white New Yorkers bought, was a scapegoating fiction fueled by fear and crafted in part for political purposes: "Hughson's Plot, of men meeting in a tavern plotting to replace the governor—looked to [Horsmanden] so much like a blacker version of the Country Party of the 1730s that he dedicated himself to the task of exposing these 'latent Enemies.'" In the account of the trial that he later wrote, Lepore adds, "Horsmanden made his political point: a slave conspiracy is like a political party, only even more sinister." The subtext of the prosecution, then, was this: There are forces opposed to our society that live among us; the government is justified in using all available means to squelch them, for the good of all. The "Bonfires of the Negros," by this argument, were meant to signal a crackdown on both slave terrorism and upstart political opposition.

Lepore—the author of books about King Philip's War and the use of language in early America—has chosen an exquisite puzzle for a historian. There is a load of colorful material detailing the events of 1741, but all of it is from one side—largely from Horsmanden's account. The challenge is to tease out what isn't there, to give a voice to those whom history has rendered mute. She does this with great skill. The story of the conspiracy that Horsmanden tells has slaves forming a secret society; oaths are sworn, a secret book is kissed and elaborate meals are consumed, all while the plotting goes on.

Each of these features, Lepore shows, directly parallels the features of the gentlemen's clubs that were de rigueur in New York's elite white society of the time (the Freemason lodge in New York had been founded four years earlier). So while slaves and poor whites did meet throughout the city amid the privations of the harsh winter of 1740–41, joined by their common misery, there was no feasting on veal, mutton and goose, no elaborate scheme to "take the Country."

The whole town was suffering that winter; and the image of slaves gorging themselves in a way that whites couldn't afford while being waited on by white women, one of them pregnant with a black man's child, speaks to the darkest fears of white society. The story that Horsmanden sold, Lepore says, was "a plot dripping with plot, ripe to bursting with familiar characters and contrivances." Lepore's exposure of it shows the affair of 1741 as an important nexus in American history: a place near the nation's core where race and revolution—slave rebellion and colonial rebellion—are joined.

One of the challenges for both the writer and reader of history is to excavate a given era's beliefs: when it comes to a society's fear, to see to what extent it rests on something real (here, slave rebellion) and to understand both what lies beneath it (oppression) and how much the fear may have been magnified and rechanneled for the purposes of those in power. Of course, this also applies to the present. Lepore's unwillingness to relate the fear-and-power play of her particular story to history more broadly—to make it relevant—may limit her readership to those with a special interest in the era. That would be unfortunate, because the lesson at the heart of her book—how those who abuse power become haunted by the nightmare of retribution—could hardly be more timely. ■



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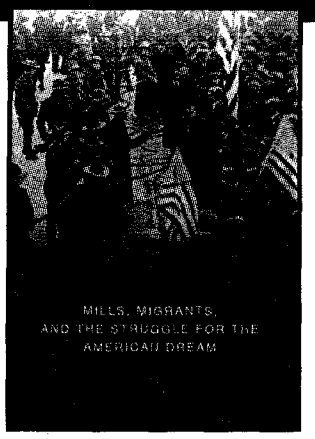

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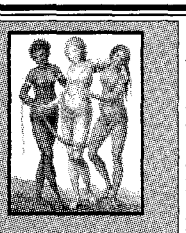

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I Wonder As I Wander

MICHAEL GORRA

A FIELD GUIDE TO GETTING LOST.
By Rebecca Solnit. Viking. 211 pp. $21.95.

The boat had gotten us to dinner, but after the risotto and the wine we decided to pick our way back through the dark traffic-free streets, and I remember stopping to look at the menu in the window of a plausible-looking restaurant on my left. Twenty minutes later I slowed to read a second menu, this time on my right. The waiters were putting up the chairs, but something seemed familiar, and I looked again: same place. Well, there are no prizes for getting lost in Venice. Walking in circles is what you're supposed to do—one of the clichés within which any visitor to that city will find himself. So maybe it says something about Rebecca Solnit's new book that it doesn't contain such a moment. Or maybe that says something about me—that before reading it I thought, from its title alone, that I already knew where this book would take me.

But *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* is without clichés: no Venice, no *flâneurs* and only the slimmest of references to the labyrinth. In her opening chapter Solnit sketches an aesthetic of losing yourself, one that starts with the Passover ritual of leaving a door open for Elijah. Though for her what matters isn't "that Elijah might show up someday. The important thing is that the doors are left open to the dark." This is the most familiar part of her book, in which she describes the childhood need to get lost in safety—the kind of getting lost that Venice allows—and links the "art of being at home in the unknown" to Keats's theory of Negative Capability, his belief that artistic creation depends on the ability to step outside the self, to see beyond the limits of one's assumptions. Getting physically lost, however, is only a prelude to the more important experience of getting psychically lost, and Solnit writes evocatively of nights on the road, alone in strange motels "that furnish a reprieve from my own biography, when... I have lost myself though I know where I am." And the next chapters map the contours of a land that lies even beyond that, where the sense of being lost shades into a sense of loss itself.

Most of the ways people lose themselves have little to do with the bodily experience of not finding one's way. That's at most a starting point, as it was for the conquistador Cabeza de Vaca, who in 1527 "entered the realm of the utter unknown" through the two gates of "honor and greed." His wanderings took him from years of slavery to Florida to Texas and New Mexico, with the self "pared back to nothing, no language, no clothes, no weapons, no power." When after a decade he finally encountered some other Spaniards, he could see them only as thieves who, in his words, "bestowed nothing on anyone." For Solnit he's someone who "ceased to be lost not by returning but by turning into something else." Cabeza de Vaca found a second self; he lost enough to survive.

Solnit's book provides something like a taxonomy of loss. There is the loss of one's history, which her immigrant ancestors experienced in the move through Ellis Island. There's the loss of which country music sings: "not the modern stuff that is mostly sentimental pop with fiddles and a twang, but the older tunes" that dwell on the "aftermath" of heartbreak. There is the loss of home and childhood, which one needs to lose, and there are lost friends, companions one may lose because they have first lost themselves. Or one can lose oneself to others, as Kim Novak's character does in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, a movie that inspires some of Solnit's best pages and whose real subject, she suggests, is her home city of San Francisco. Nor is that sense of loss limited to the human, for at the end of the book Solnit reflects on the earth's lost species, the passenger pigeons and Santa Barbara song sparrows and "the blue pike of the Great Lakes gone extinct right about when men first walked on the moon."

Solnit's title teases us with rigor. Can this taxonomy really be as comprehensive as something like the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms*? But her distinctions aren't so firmly drawn as mycology requires, and so she alternates chapters with titles like "Daisy Chains"

Michael Gorra teaches English at Smith College. His most recent book is The Bells in Their Silence: Travels Through Germany *(Princeton).*

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and "Two Arrowheads" with a series of others all named "The Blue of Distance." There's some difference between them, with the former veering toward autobiography and the latter leaning into the historical. Still, in reading I felt if not lost then at least perplexed by the book's arrangement: wondering why certain experiences belonged in one loosely structured chapter and not another; and wanting to know if the book was conceived as a single work or assembled from already existing fragments. Solnit maintains a consistent tone, and her last pages do feel like an ending, a diminuendo of the emotions, with "all the sea spreading far and then farther." Yet that ending lacks any sense of inevitability; why stop there?

For my part, I could easily have lost myself in this book for 100 more pages. Solnit's work at its best is as fresh as an orange, and over the past dozen years this prolific Californian has produced a series of consistently provocative books. *Savage Dreams* (1994) describes what she calls the "hidden wars of the American West," the wars over land use and water rights and the claims of indigenous peoples. *Wanderlust* (2000) defines itself as "a history of walking" that makes some predictable stops—Wordsworth, pilgrimage—but also asks its readers to consider the protest march as a kind of collective stroll. And Solnit herself presents an interesting profile: a committed urbanist and an outdoorswoman, an environmentalist who knows how to shoot and is also at home with the most sophisticated forms of contemporary art. She's been compared to both Annie Dillard and Susan Sontag and seems, weirdly, to combine them—the naturalist and the modernist—while being more conversant with an archive than either.

Solnit's boldest and most important book to date is *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (2003), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism. Born in Britain, Muybridge arrived in San Francisco in 1855 and set up as a bookseller. Soon he was taking photographs as well, and in 1877 he developed the high-speed shutter. Muybridge first used that equipment to take pictures of horses in motion, and the story goes that he did it to win a bet for railroad magnate Leland Stanford, who is said to have wagered that at certain points in its stride a trotter had all four feet off the ground at once. Solnit prints the legend but discounts it, and instead links the robber baron's funding of Muybridge's experiments to his later deed of gift for Stanford University, which specified his interest in engineering and applied science. But *River of Shadows* offers much more than an account of stop-action photography. Taking her cue from the subjects of Muybridge's *oeuvre*, Solnit provides an essay on the history of California that moves from Yosemite to the octopus of the railroad, from the state's Indian wars to the astonishing growth of San Francisco. And it makes the startling claim that Muybridge's "annihilation of time and space" lies at the heart of California's modern identity, insofar as it points toward the movies on the one hand and, through his alliance with Stanford, toward Silicon Valley on the other.

A Field Guide to Getting Lost is a smaller book and in many ways less bold, but it stands out for Solnit's willingness to push harder on her language than she has ever before. Although she's never hidden behind the scrim of objectivity, even her 1997 Irish travel narrative, *A Book of Migrations*, is touched by a reticence at odds with its genre. Here she is far more personal, more direct. She now has the confidence to allow her life and presence to assume greater narrative weight, whether she's evoking a punked-out adolescence, recalling a small shocking encounter with her father or even describing the mind-cleansing pleasures of a long drive, of "roads whose mesas and diners were always the same and whose light and clouds and weather never were." And as this passage suggests, Solnit's prose here glistens like a snake with a new skin. In her earlier work you hardly ever noticed a sentence. Now her language demands a different level of attention, as though it were trying to achieve a new adequacy to the physical world it describes. Her style is not as mannered or as memorable as that of Joan Didion, and because of that her version of California may never gain the traction it deserves. Yet it is every bit as suggestive.

Solnit once wrote that she aspires to the kind of work called "hybrid," in which "public life spills over into personal anecdote, emotion evolves into analysis," a form of writing that takes its inspiration from the meander and flow of conversation. In this book she compares the writing of fiction and expository prose, and she notes, "In essays, ideas are the protagonists, and they often develop much like characters." She has an enviable ability to transform those ideas into the vehicles of narrative, and her own work resembles a richly conceived character, capable of sudden turns and sharp twists, changing direction from book to book and page to page in ways that, in retrospect, are nevertheless consistent with what she's done before. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* makes only a modest claim. Yet it has something close to perfect pitch, an intermezzo in an increasingly impressive career. ■

FILMS

About a Girl

STUART KLAWANS

BREAKFAST ON PLUTO • SHOPGIRL

There *is* accounting for taste—there has to be—and so I begin this review of *Breakfast on Pluto* by acknowledging my career as a cross-dressing musical artiste of the 1970s. A very brief career: I was in fact oblivious to that era's trend, or (if you prefer) world-shaking cultural upheaval of gender-bent pop music. Congenitally square, irremediably straight, I would have missed the whole thing, except for having been assigned to hop around a stage nightly in hermaphrodite drag, as the pet androgyne in a Chicago production of *Volpone*.

Because of that experience (and maybe a few others), glitter rock and the territory beyond were not alien enough to me to seem enticing. Neither were they so charged with immanent meaning as to promise liberation. To this day, I can name only one song by David Bowie; and yet a fictional tribute to him, *Velvet Goldmine*, is by far my favorite Todd Haynes movie, not because I love the music and fashions but because Haynes does. They bring out the fantasy and irresponsibility in him; they make him playful. On the evidence of his other films, I'd guess that Haynes doesn't trust those tendencies in himself any more than he believes that fabulous-

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ness is an adequate program for young gay men when they're isolated and beset. On that last point, as a practical matter, I'd have to agree. But since I have no practical reasons for going to the movies or listening to music, I continue to watch *Velvet Goldmine* for its value as escapism and to enjoy glitter rock (through its effect on Haynes and others) as a contact high.

Neil Jordan's latest feature, *Breakfast on Pluto*, happens to skirt Bowie's music, even though much of the film is set in London during the early and mid-1970s. You hardly even get disco. But in telling the story of Patrick "Kitten" Braden (played by Cillian Murphy, who wears lip gloss as if he'd been born for it), the movie throbs, or lilts, or sometimes bounces along perkily to the many pop tunes that are, as Kitten might say, the soundtrack of her life. It is not a serious life, or it is as little serious as she can make it. Isolated and beset as a child, and for that matter as a grown-up, Kitten feels she would have more than enough troubles to ignore even if she could avoid the guns-and-bombs aspect of Irish politics, which she can't. So her program is to let her favorite tunes carry her along as she drifts through various showbiz careers: cross-dressing musical artiste, theme-park dancing animal, magician's assistant, peep-show girl-on-a-swing.

Based on a novel by Patrick McCabe (who has collaborated with Jordan before, on *The Butcher Boy*), *Breakfast on Pluto* takes the form of Kitten's memoirs, which she dictates in voiceover to an infant she's pushing in a pram. Experience addresses itself to Innocence, and to you, a presumably innocent member of the audience: You get an upbeat and even whimsical tale, sometimes commented upon by twittering animatronic birds, about abandonment, brutality, loss and impoverishment.

In outline, it's the familiar story of the outcast child—a girl, born in a boy's body—who runs off from her pious small town and winds up walking the streets of the big city. Many of the motifs are familiar, too, from earlier Jordan films, starting with *Mona Lisa* and *The Miracle* and running through *The Crying Game*, *The Butcher Boy* and even *Interview With the Vampire*. Slim, endangered beauties (of whatever gender) are forever sauntering through Jordan's movies—along resort-town piers, down the London streets—trailed by hurt children or sad-eyed men, while a pop song cries out their emotions for them and the IRA prepares to set off another bomb. There will be Irish landscapes and absent blond mothers and a few fairy-tale creatures, and at some point Stephen Rea (Jordan's signature actor) may perform a magic trick. As a summary of such Jordan stuff, *Breakfast on Pluto* flirts at times with auteurist self-reflection, while at other moments it threatens to become a social-issues report; but it rises above both categories, thanks to its conjunction of Innocence and Experience. While Kitten's narration lends imaginative buoyancy to the tale, Jordan's eye for detail (especially in the Irish settings) makes concrete and credible every fried sausage, dangling cigarette and snarled conversation.

Not that Kitten ever snarls. Although she's played by Murphy, who created the truly creepy villains in *Batman Begins* and *Red Eye*, Kitten comes across as a loving and generous soul, whose slightly oversize, curly head rolls about loosely, as if it were too fascinated by everything to look in one direction for long, or too heavy for the starved torso to support. Here's where the fashions come in. Kitten's favorite clothes—such as a long, tailored double-breasted coat with snakeskin pattern and faux-fur collar—don't just make her look lovely but seem to hold her up, like a groovy exoskeleton. Of course, it's all in how you wear them. Kitten's story is a fable of self-invention—that is, of the persistence needed to keep inventing oneself and survive; and Murphy, in complete harmony with the character, transforms himself. Some of what he does is heartbreaking, in a matter-of-fact way (as when, playing the teenage Kitten, he suffers at the hands of people who feel his body is theirs to yank about at will); and some of it is astonishingly funny (as when, after a week's brutal interrogation by the police, he is summarily released and makes a mad dash to get back into the cell). Murphy is so good that he even makes you understand how a john can see Kitten as a bearer of hope and kindness when she's standing hungry and bedraggled in the rain.

Though Murphy's great performance carries the movie, dominating virtually every scene, *Breakfast on Pluto* is much bigger than a one-actor film. If anything, in fact, it's too big. At two and a quarter hours, the picture may run through the patience of some viewers before it exhausts all its incidents, characters and plain roaming around. That said, the expansiveness serves a purpose. Kitten needs enough time and space for her journey so that she can later go home, for an improbable but wholly satisfying reconciliation.

Perhaps only a baby in a pram could believe it, but Kitten at last gets the unselfish love she's always wanted, and from the least likely source. Never mind that her

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happiness, as always, is ringed by anger and violence—dark mutterings in the town, a nocturnal firebombing. The wonderful thing about *Breakfast on Pluto* is that a playful responsibility triumphs. That is to say, it persists.

As for the movie's title, I'm told it comes from another of those pop songs I never heard.

The plot is sparse, the sentiments common and the mise-en-scène (by Anand Tucker) little more than workmanlike; so *Shopgirl* lives or dies on whether you care about Mirabelle, the young woman Claire Danes is impersonating. According to the setup, she is a Vermont native who came to Los Angeles to be an artist, and who now spends her days behind the glove counter at Saks Fifth Avenue and her nights alone in a small, cheap apartment. You might wonder why her drawings are mostly a thick surface of charcoal, rubbed across the paper edge-to-edge, and how come her social circle is limited to her cat; and you will get some answers, eventually. But long before the film slips you that information, you need to ache for Mirabelle and hope for her, or else there simply will be no movie.

I say this as high praise—because Steve Martin, who wrote *Shopgirl* (both the screenplay and the novella on which it's based), now stands almost alone among contemporary American filmmakers in knowing what "character-driven" means, and because Claire Danes, from her first moment on the screen, makes Mirabelle into the bright, attractive friend you worry about.

She does it as a silent-movie actress would, or a dancer. She listens to the other performers not just with her ears and eyes but with her neck, stretching it, bobbing it, using it moment by moment to lean in to something she likes to hear or away from something that troubles her. When she's disappointed, she doesn't merely exhale, she deflates. When she smiles—really smiles—she also lifts, as if the expression were rising and spreading from the soles of her feet. In a lesser actress, this mime might seem artificial. But Danes is calculated only in keeping her features as still as the occasion allows, knowing that her broad, clear-skinned face, even at rest, is as legible as a billboard. Watching her, you think other actresses look half-alive at best. You even forget for a while that other actresses exist.

The conceit of *Shopgirl* is that Mirabelle herself has effortlessly and unintentionally made two men forget about other women. Jeremy (Jason Schwartzman) is her age- and class-appropriate lover—or at least he would be, if she could put up with his company. An unshaven, stringy-haired *shlub* who chatted her up in the laundromat, Jeremy is either unusually candid or else was raised by wolves. He is so unpolished, not to mention cheap, that a long period of hanging out with a rock band can actually help to socialize him. While Jeremy is being so improved, Mirabelle allows herself to fall in with the much older and wealthier Ray (Steve Martin), who knows how to invite her to restaurants and pay her small, playful compliments. In Martin's wonderfully subtle performance, in which he serves always as a foil for Danes, he is at first tentative in these attentions. He holds in check his extraordinary physical grace and instead plays up the weight that the years have added to his face and frame. He wants you to see that Ray knows Mirabelle could reject him, for the most irrefutable of reasons; and so, despite his money and sophistication, she has power over him, temporarily.

What makes *Shopgirl* so affecting (apart from Martin's willingness to let Schwartzman get all the laughs) are the undercurrents that run between the characters: the hints of fear and sadness that are present even in their kindnesses to one another. Let a passing moment, of no importance to the plot, serve as the example. When Mirabelle goes home to Vermont for a visit, her father (Sam Bottoms) beams with joy at her presence, but he can't think of anything to say to her. So the two, while loving each other, sit silent and apart.

As Martin says in his voiceover narration, that's life. But as he also says, sometimes love breaks through, if it's "tender and true." In other movies, that sentiment would come across as corn. In *Shopgirl*, it's something you can believe.

Claire Danes is the proof: tender and true. ■

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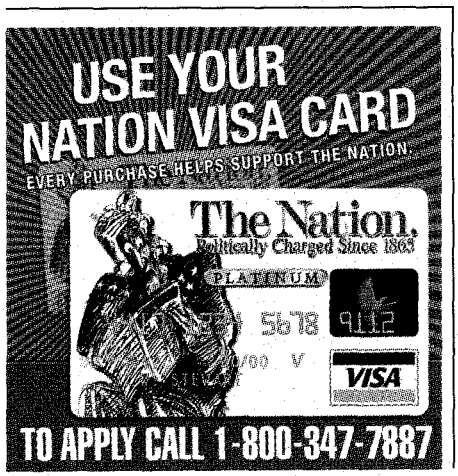

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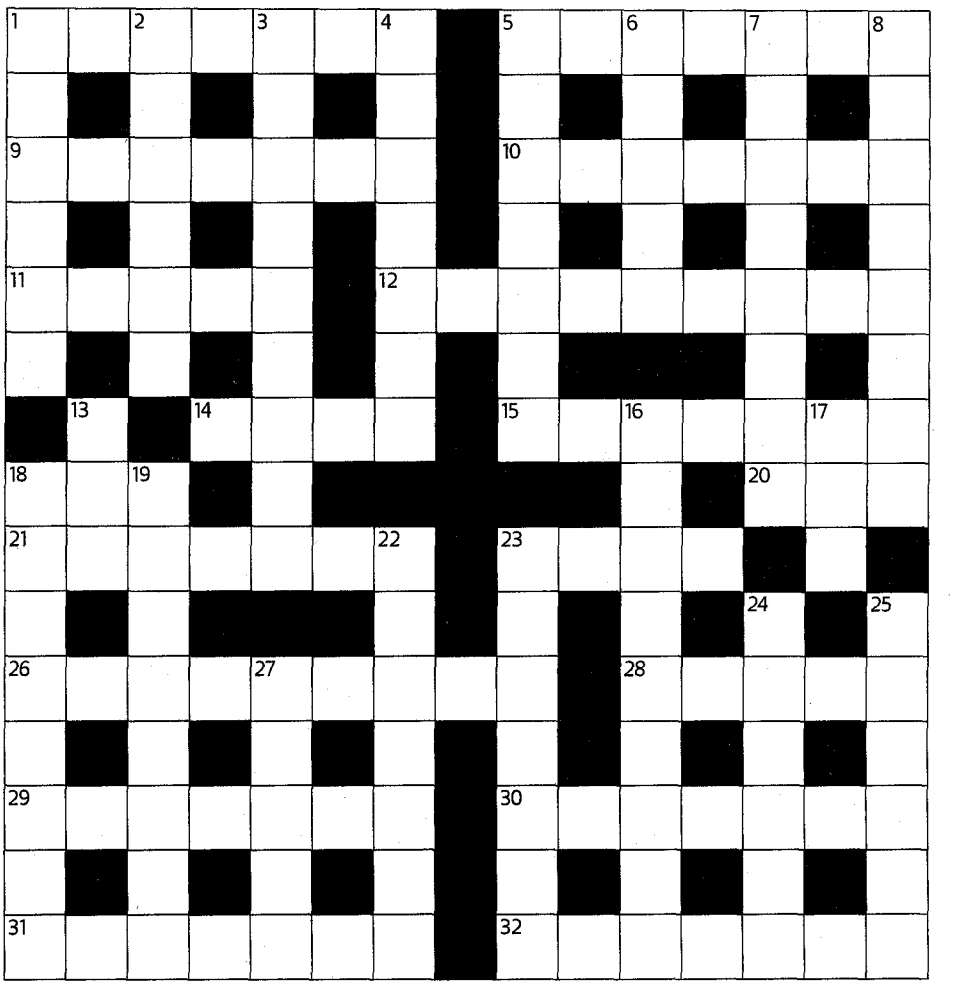

ACROSS

1 Concerning certain forms of transportation, you can picture such words. (7)

5 A place in Finland where you have such as cats and dogs—and I love to place it here, in classical style. (7)

9 Talk a lot of stuff when I'm inside, and perhaps monkey with it. (7)

10 A person gets sort of sour when given such tasks. (7)

11 What one pays for travel, perhaps, if you want to see a little island some place. (5)

12 Made an effort to get around a short referee with a head start—and proved a winner! (9)

14 Rang up a debt, but it's nothing to get hitched up on. (4)

15 All agog, ire being responsible for such a state. (7)

18, 20 and 28 A perpetual roller, judged by the air at one time. (3,3,5)

21 Show approbation in the front part of the theater, with a fancy "thank you!" (7)

23 Sort of deaf, which causes a gradual "fall away." (4)

26 The obvious profession of Noah. (Jenny came out because of him.) (9)

28 See 18

29 Lo! Being a sort of it is pretty low down! (7)

30 Hurried when the old ruler got around a strait connected to the Adriatic and Mediterranean. (7)

31 Casting off the outer coat—jokingly said to be the occupation of such as Gypsy Rose Lee. (7)

32 Quit making you and me get rid of a lot of money around it! (7)

DOWN

1 Mr. Van Winkle noticed something in the tool kit, it seems. (6)

2 With a broken rib, not up to being an early UK resident. (6)

3 A couple of important points, with everything due to what you did at a gulp! (9)

4 Could make a wild descent, as your nose points out such things. (7)

5 What the investigator might be doing, being other than an amateur with such as Crosby. (7)

6 One hot unit!—being a meaningful expression about a hothead. (5)

7 A pithy instructive statement, which makes the map go wild! (8)

8 Possibly getting in so bad, I should have a rather glassy look! (8)

13 11 across doesn't have to make everything! (3)

16 What the prosthetics dealers have to do occasionally—just as the soldier might be told to do! (5,4)

17 John of Glasgow, in a different form. (3)

18 The mood of the Greeks might express a wish, being a sort of poet that comes around at four, as the Romans say. (8)

19 Had the temerity when about to understand something, and cast a deep shadow. (8)

22 Little Theresa is about to rig improperly a Female of the Jungle. (7)

23 Understands my father lies in several of these, according to the poet. (7)

24 The way to show a place of crime? (6)

25 Benedict sort of ran a not-new version. (6)

27 Proving the Boers were sort of dress-makers. (5)

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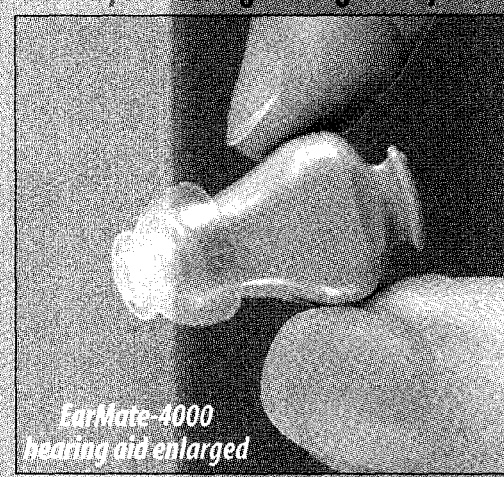

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